"WE WHO WANDER THIS WASTELAND IN SEARCH OF OUR BETTER SELVES": SURVIVALISM, COMMUNITY, AND IDENTITY WITHIN THE POST-APOCALYPTIC SUBCULTURE AT WASTELAND WEEKEND

By

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: "We Who Wander This Wasteland in Search of Our Better Selves": Survivalism, Community, and Identity Within the Post-Apocalyptic Subculture at Wasteland Weekend

Initially a *Mad Max*-themed car show, Wasteland Weekend has become a yearly gathering where wanderers of "The Wastes" convene for a week in the Mojave Desert to escape, barter, and celebrate their survival in a post-apocalyptic alternative realm. Individuals who attend, known as "Wastelanders," share a fundamental concept of a post-apocalyptic world based on a popular culture film franchise, resulting in the creation of a subculture that champions survivalism through community and self-actualization. Through information gathered from fieldwork research and participant observation, this multi-disciplinary folkloric exploration draws upon the scholarship in the areas of subcultural formation, ritual and festival studies, the carnivalesque, bricolage, post-apocalypticism, and identity transformation. By exploring the personal motivations and communal attributes central to the Wastelander subculture, this thesis analyzes influences on cultural expression shaping the discussion surrounding the Wastelander identity and the underlying motivation behind attending Wasteland Weekend.

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To the weirdos – may you find your tribe for when the world ends and build something beautiful among the rubble.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

CHAPTER I

WELCOME TO WASTELAND WEEKEND: AN OVERVIEW

After turning off from a two-lane desert highway, you drive onto a secluded dirt road. Dusk has settled over the California desert as a seemingly endless line of brake lights glows ahead in the distance for miles. Soon the radio picks up a transmission; a rough, gravelly voice pierces through the static: “My life fades. The vision dims. All that remains are memories. I remember the Road Warrior, the man we call ‘Max.’ But mostly, I remember the music blaring from a burnt-out shell of a radio station. And it was here, in this blighted place, that we learned to listen again...this is Wasteland Radio.” The car time-travels into a post-apocalyptic world, a Bakhtinian geographical chronotope, existing in a liminal space within multiple realms of possibility – after the nuclear bombs dropped, wars ended, and all society collapsed. The life you once knew is gone. The car soon approaches the main gates flanked by two towers constructed from rusted sheet metal connected by metal scaffolding in an angular arch. Above the scaffolding, welded metal letters engulfed in flames spell “Wasteland.” Menacing-looking elite guards, clad in armor and helmets ostentatiously adorned with mohawks, populate the towers and oversee the eager crowd filing in slowly. One guard, covered in head-to-toe white body paint with black circles around their eyes, raises their arms above their head, hands laced together in a salute. Beyond the gates lies a makeshift city of sensorial overload: the roar of engines and the shouts of the crowd; the smell of dust and the flow of alcohol; a thermonuclear, dieselpunk, dystopian paradise. It is here, in this blighted place, that they learned to live again; this is Wasteland Weekend.

The Event

History

Those who attend Wasteland Weekend covered in dirt, metal, and leather are no longer the lawyers, accountants, front-line, and trade workers of the "old world"; they become "Wastelanders" who survived the apocalypse and gather together for the annual five-day "Great Gathering of Tribes" in the Mojave Desert. They come to escape, drink, barter and connect with like-minded enthusiasts of the *Mad Max* film franchise and other post-apocalyptic media. Wasteland Weekend began as a modest tribute to *Mad Max* in 2009. It was then called "Road Warrior Weekend" and has since grown to be the largest post-apocalyptic music and arts festival in the world, boasting between roughly 4,000 and 5,000 attendees each year. During the span of the festival, Wasteland becomes a self-sustaining temporary municipality with its own form of currency and bartering system. It includes makeshift structures consisting of the main stage, movie theatre, casino, bars, and arenas as well as a communications center containing a functioning post-office, radio station (88.3 FM "Wasteland Radio"), and newsstand that produces a daily newspaper (*The Wastelander*). And, of course, no homage to *Mad Max* would be complete without the Thunderdome where Wastelanders battle one another in an arena built similarly to the one in the titular film *Mad Max*: *Beyond the Thunderdome* – except with foam weapons so as not to inflict severe injuries. In its early years, Wasteland took place outside California City, CA, also known as "H-Park/Camp H," but after the release of *Mad Max: Fury Road* in 2015, the location could no longer sustain the influx of new participants. In 2016, the organization purchased the property at which the event currently takes place,

now called “Wasteland Valley,” in Edwards, CA, increasing the festival’s size and duration. Wasteland Weekend went from a weekend occurrence to a five-day event, starting on Wednesday and ending on Sunday every September.

Theme

While there are distinct similarities between Wasteland Weekend and other desert festivals like Burning Man and period-specific events like Renaissance Faires, the ultimate difference is Wasteland’s dedication to total thematic immersion. Wasteland organizers highly encourage full participation by stressing that attendees dress in “theme” to access all facilities and maintain the post-apocalyptic atmosphere.

> The costume requirement and the guidelines [on the website] are the way we guarantee that everyone contributes something to the event (and more importantly, doesn’t distract from it). This is why we have particular zones that are 100% theme-required (like Wasteland City) so that when our participants step through those gates they have an unbroken, 360 degree view of the post-apocalyptic world they’ve helped create. (Wastelandweekend.com)

The theme requirement, described as “post-nuclear/dieselpunk,” encompasses costumes, cars, and camps and mainly takes its inspiration from the *Mad Max* film franchise. Wasteland Weekend Event Director and co-founder Jared Butler explains that at the event’s inception, there was a discussion among other co-founders Karol Bartoszynski and James Howard whether to make it strictly a *Mad Max* event or allow outside post-apocalyptic influences. They eventually decided that as long as the event posed a world that was a “grounded-in-reality version of something post-apocalyptic,” it would allow

for a more accessible, immersive experience (Bartoszynski and Howard left the organization in 2014 and 2011, respectively; Adam Chilson is the current co-owner and Chief of Operations). This expanded perspective allows Wastelanders to use other dystopian-related content from various media as inspiration: video game franchises like *Fallout*, films like *Waterworld* and *The Book of Eli*, and novels and graphic novels like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and *Tank Girl* by Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin.

> For us, everyone at Wasteland should feel, to some extent, like they are participating, not just a spectator. So even when we bring in members of the news media, for example, they have to wear something so that they can blend in so that it doesn't really break this immersive feel that we have. And that small but significant difference with our event, and the overriding theme, has really allowed us to create something special. (Butler)

While Burning Man has loosely defined themes and Ren Faires have a spectator-performer dynamic, there is a collective, interactive narrative within the borders of Wasteland. Most participants understand the theme as an adventurous take on the world constructed in the *Mad Max* macrocosm, where the fall of society results in the depletion of resources, including gasoline, causing several conflicts central to the plot of the film series. There is no consensus, however, surrounding the events that led to the end of the world in Wasteland's lore, which was an intentional decision to allow Wastelanders to engage in whatever they believed would thematically fit into its post-apocalyptic narrative.

> We didn't want to define the rules of what people could do as far as they're kind of playing pretend. So, we basically just said, 'We are in an apocalyptic scenario;

> this is the date range of which this apocalypse may have occurred.' But we didn't even get as specific as to say which kind of apocalypse created this world…The general lore that we put out in the very beginning was just that Wasteland Weekend was a gathering of various tribes in the wasteland in a world that obviously civilization has collapsed. There aren't as many people as there used to be. It is a dangerous place. But we have this kind of trading post called 'Wasteland City' that pops up once a year, similar to the way nomadic tribes do it in other parts of the world for real. (Butler)

Wasteland is not strictly a Live-Action-Role-Play ("LARP") event – LARPing is an interactive role-playing experience where participants portray characters, dress in costumes and enact fictional scenarios – as organizers felt it would put too many restrictions on attendees and limit their overall audience. They do not discourage Wastelanders from approaching the festival as a LARPing experience, "LARP-lite," as Butler calls it. Though there is a collective theme, the overall content at Wasteland is a display of creativity, pageantry, and individuality. It is impossible to ignore the creative acumen and dedication to total immersion exemplified in Wastelanders' efforts to bring the city to life.

Tribes

The Wasteland Weekend organization sponsors events such as the car show and the main stage performances while partner organizations, like the Death Guild, sponsors the Thunderdome, but tribes create a majority of the structures, events, services, and activities. The most basic definition of a "tribe" describes those who camp together, but

tribes can also form when a group of individuals shares a particular aesthetic or idea for which some will host an event or provide a service to fellow Wastelanders. For example, while Wastelanders are responsible for bringing their own food and water supplies, there was a growing need for coffee, thus, creating the tribe the "Khafiends." Tribes can invent their own lore, which can also intersect with the lore of other tribes. Some tribe leaders will meet prior to the event to discuss their collective stories moving forward, building tension on their respective platforms until there is a culmination point at Wasteland – typically presenting itself as a performative piece in which other Wastelanders can spectate. Sometimes these alliances or rivalries result in fun missions or quests for Wastelanders. The most successful events or services solidify a tribe's presence within the Wasteland community. If an individual or tribe has established themselves in the past by providing an event or service that has proven popular among Wastelanders, they can apply to camp in Wasteland City. Once approved, they receive special camping privileges within the city limits; this grants them early access, allowing them ample time to set up their camps before the event begins. Some of the more prominent tribes of Wasteland are "Road Rash," "cimotA," "Wasted Saints," "Dukes of the Nuke," "Ghoulcrest Hunting Club," "Rust Devils," "The Cult of Catmeat," "The Northern Nomads," "The Mighty Skulduggers," "Last Chance Casino," and the "Deathcaps," to name a few.

The Subculture

With the success of the event, Wasteland Weekend organizers also established a thriving subculture. Sociologist J. Patrick Williams describes subcultures as:

> culturally bounded, but not closed, networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects, and practices through interaction. Over time, their interactions develop into a discourse and culture that shapes, but does not determine, the generation, activation, and diffusion of these ideas, objects, and practices. (Williams 36)

Williams' assessment of subcultural theory suggests that while past theoretical pursuits have helped academics to find a consensus on how to study the commonalities and motivations behind subcultures, much of what we can ascertain is that the fundamental concepts behind each theory themselves mimic the overall understanding behind human behavior; behavior which is largely unpredictable. We must not define all subcultures monolithically through insular theories but approach them with multiple concepts as each subculture differs from each other, which is, epistemically, the core "point" behind subcultural creation.

To further elucidate ways to codify subcultures, sociologist Paul Hodkinson observed the patterns and behaviors of the goth subculture to formulate a rudimentary scale of indicators present within subcultures: consistent distinctiveness, identity, commitment, and autonomy. These are fluid criteria defining the features of a subculture but serve as a barometer to measure the extent of how subcultures form under similar circumstances. While not completely adhering to the features Hodkinson outlines, Wasteland does possess the features of a subculture.

Consistent Distinctiveness

Hodkinson states that a primary factor in subcultures is their consistent distinctiveness; in addition to a subculture's homology, symbolism, and cooperative ideals towards societal restructuring, varying levels of interpretation create diverse reactions amongst the populace. These reactions are still indicative of the defining underlying values espoused by the group, despite variance through individuals, time, and locale: "the first indicator of subcultural substance comprises the existence of a set of shared tastes and values which is distinctive from those of other groups and reasonably consistent, from one participant to the next, one place to the next and one year to the next" (Hodkinson 30). Such indicators are present within the formation of folk groups as well as subcultures. A folk group has many definitions. Folklorist Alan Dundes provides a minimalist definition of a folk group as being "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is – it could be a common occupation, language, or religion – but what is important is that a group . . . have some traditions that it calls its own" (Dundes 2). In addition to shared traditions, an important "common factor" within folk groups often is a sense of shared identity. Folklorist Lynne S. McNeill elaborates further on the notion of folk groups sharing a common element, explaining that this factor can be "national, ethnic, regional, occupational, interest-based – basically anything that unites and generates a shared cultural understanding" (McNeill 4). Folklorist Barre Toelken shares a comparable observation within folk groups, explaining their dynamic nature. Despite their cultural connections, a folk groups' context affects the interactions within the group: "a particular place (geographic region, a certain room in the house), a particular time (of day, month,

year), a certain group of people present, an esoteric language being used, an intensely shared culture or tradition, a particular activity taking place, and so on" (Toelken 56).

Most Wastelanders share a love of post-apocalyptic/apocalyptic content, mainly the *Mad Max* film series, but they also value creativity beyond the parameters of the fictional universe demonstrated within Wasteland and consistently innovate upon existing traditions and dystopian interpretations. Although their activities and values are not completely extraterrestrial to the general population, Wastelanders like "Nomad" find it difficult to explain the Wasteland subculture to outsiders; "The easiest way to say it is, 'We're *Mad Max* fans and we just play on the movie culture.' That's the easiest way to spoon-feed it to the vanilla people – the vanilla culture." The collective values held by festival attendees are still present, but many Wastelanders, like "Jameson," describe the experience as unique to each Wastelander:

> You're talking about a singular event where you're having multiple people going in a psychology, sociology direction. There's an incident: a guy falls off his bicycle, ten people see it, each one of their stories are going to be different. So, you can go in seeing video, seeing pictures, listening to what people have said. But when you get there, it's totally going to be different. Yeah, that building might be what it is, but to experience it, stand there and see it, it's a totally different experience. (Jameson)

From an individual perspective, each Wastelander's induction into the event and subsequently the subculture is idiosyncratic. Despite the individual contributions and experiences, Wastelanders still grow as a community in their efforts to build a world where everyone can participate. As Toelken notes, the reason a folk group persists is not

its population, but because "its members continue to use their shared vernacular system of reference" (58). Like other folk groups and subcultures, there is variance among Wastelanders themselves and what they bring to the festival, but they all contribute to the verisimilitude of Wasteland Weekend.

Identity

Apart from the shared values and distinct style of a subculture, Hodkinson also focuses on the individual's self-perception and the extent to which they belong to and identify with said culture: "Leaving aside the importance of evaluating consistent distinctiveness from a distance, a clear and sustained subjective sense of group identity, in itself, begins to establish a grouping as substantive rather than ephemeral" (Hodkinson 31). He suggests the long-term effects subcultures have on individuals are based on their positionality and credits their experiences as grounded, not cursory. Much like organic temperament of folk groups where context is crucial to qualitative changes within the culture, the subcultural influence on the individual is similarly worth exploring as their surroundings can shape their identity (Ben-Amos 4). As Williams notes, "Identity is important to everyone because we are socialized to recognize its impact on our everyday lives. How we dress and talk, the kind of lifestyle we have, where we come from, and where we are going…all these things are tied up in the notion of identity, which itself is part of one's self-conception" (Williams 100). Self-perception manifests through different means depending on each Wastelander, but some use the experience as an opportunity to explore their personal journey within the post-apocalyptic alternative realm. For example, Wastelanders will adopt a pseudonym or Wastelander name

throughout the event that they typically carry with them into future events. The individual can obtain the name before or during the festival and how one acquires this pseudonym can vary; most earn their names from other festival-goers due to their noticeable actions or features. For example, a friend of mine, who has attended Wasteland for several years, is known as "Gateway" among Wastelanders for his role as a volunteer at the event's registration and check-in at the front gate. These Wasteland monikers are not merely reflective; they can influence how a Wastelander experiences the festival.

Commitment

According to Hodkinson, subcultures require exceptional amounts of commitment, "Subcultures are liable to influence extensively the everyday lives of participants in practice, and that, more often than not, this concentrated involvement will last years rather than months" (Hodkinson 31). Although Wasteland as a whole takes fewer than five days to construct, Wastelanders spend months, even years, ahead of the festival preparing their gear and soliciting advice from veteran attendees through online communication platforms. "Preparation starts as soon as you get home," Gateway laughs. He explains that some Wastelanders take the time after the event to analyze the success or failure of their equipment, based on damage from wear or weather. "One of the things that people don't really anticipate, especially the first time or if they've never encountered it, is wind. Wind will take things away, wind will destroy things, and it just wreaks havoc. So, you kind of go through an inventory of what failed or what you didn't end up using" (Gateway). From there, they determine if things are salvageable or need to be entirely rebuilt, which can be costly and time-consuming. Nonetheless, some

Wastelanders do take the time to build upon or improve their costumes, either for practicality or character evolution.

> You do want to change it every year a little bit because it's sort of this idea of progression, that this is a great gathering of tribes, and you still have a life outside of that that's in the Wasteland. So, my costume does change a little bit every year. Some people will get totally new costumes every year, but I just try to stick with a general platform of a costume and then just go with that. (Gateway)

Tribes will schedule "builds" with their members in their preparational pursuits, but some unaffiliated Wastelanders schedule their own builds as well. With all that occurs during the off-months, it is safe to assume that Wastelanders prepare for Wasteland all year round and are deeply committed to the event and the community.

Autonomy

Hodkinson also focuses on the creation of self-contained media and commerce as a measurable construct that presupposes the autonomy of a subculture,

> ...our specific interest here is in distinguishing between internal or subcultural forms of media and commerce – which operate mostly within the networks of a particular grouping - and external or non-subcultural products and services, produced by larger-scale commercial interests for a broader consumer base…However, the distinction enables an assessment of extent to which groupings operate autonomously, and the degree to which they are facilitated and constructed from within. (Hodkinson 33)

Wasteland has many components of autonomy, such as the event's on-site daily newspaper, functional post office, and amateur radio station – all are part of the Wasteland Communication Corp. (WCC), which also serves as a tribe at the event. "Wasteland Radio" creates Wasteland-sponsored public service announcements, ads, and station IDs. The post office functions as an intermediary service between Wastelanders and the US Postal Service and allows Wastelanders to send mail to each other via obliging Wastelander couriers or by sending customizable postcards outside the event. Delivering mail is one of the more popular mission-based activities among Wastelanders. The newspaper (*The Wastelander*), solicits Wastelanders as ad hoc reporters or journalists to observe the community and submit pieces to the editor, "Deadline." Because of the magnitude of events at Wasteland, participants likely cannot experience everything; *The Wastelander* keeps Wastelanders up to date with news from around the event throughout the weekend. But in addition to their self-contained communication systems, their autonomy derives mainly from their thriving barter economy.

In the heart of Wasteland City lies "Bartertown," a facsimile of the Bartertown from *Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome*. It has since become a hub for, ironically, pre-approved vendors to sell their wares, though it started as a bazaar-like environment for Wastelanders to barter. Bartering, however, happens everywhere in Wasteland. Wastelanders barter food, goods, services, and anything of value. A popular form of currency is bottle caps, which the *Fallout* video game franchise inspired. Caps vary in value; Wastlanders earn them throughout the festival by participating in activities like competitions and tribe-specific events or missions, and, of course, by bartering. For example, the "Last Chance Casino" uses their branded bottle caps as casino chips in their

various betting forums, but they do not take the place of nor can Wastelanders exchange them for real money. Most bottle caps become mementos once the festival concludes. Wasteland is not strictly a bartering community, as Wastelanders use legal monetary means in their transactions with outside vendors, but bartering and the WCC do more than produce self-contained media and material culture; they emulate the overall values espoused at Wasteland where there is a shared sense of reliance on the community.

Research Methods & Theoretical Structure

Gateway told me about Wasteland Weekend years ago, as we stood outside a small sushi bar in Gardena, CA, although my interest quickly plummeted after I learned about the required desert camping. Nevertheless, my enthusiasm towards dystopian-themed content fanned the flames of my curiosity regarding Wasteland. I had preconceived notions of what the event entailed, but the abundance of theoretical and creative influence within this post-apocalyptic festival unleashed questions that spearheaded my year-long pursuit to understand Wasteland Weekend and its subculture. Try as I might to find an underlying narrative that accurately encapsulates the Wastelander experience, one sentiment that is abundantly prevalent throughout the Wastelander creed is: “You won’t know until you go.” We can conclude that Wasteland Weekend is a gathering of individuals who share a fundamental concept of a post-apocalyptic world based on a pop-culture film franchise, which created a subculture that champions creativity and survivalism through community and self-actualization.

While the 2020 event was understandably canceled due to COVID-19 restrictions, preventing my own Wasteland experience and fieldwork as a participant-observer, I

served as a conduit between academia and the Wasteland community. I performed my research for this thesis by observing the Wastelanders' online platforms and conducting interviews with nearly twenty Wastelanders (to preserve their anonymity, I use their Wastelander names), including one of the co-creators. I gathered information based on personal accounts, images, and supplemental resources such as self-contained media and material culture to gain a clearer insight into the Wastelander subculture and its individuals. To my knowledge, while there are plentiful media accounts that cover Wasteland Weekend, there is no scholarly research on this topic, therefore, this project provides the first theoretical investigation of the Wasteland phenomenon; I address its festival and ritual practices as well as the apocalyptic survivalist influences on cultural expression, which inform my analysis of Wastelander identity and the underlying reasons that motivate people to attend Wasteland Weekend. In other words, why go? Why participate in a subculture that prides itself on the ludic representation of a post-apocalyptic second world? Why do Wastelanders come back year after year? And how has Wasteland Weekend affected the lives of Wastelanders?

I first explore the question: "Why attend Wasteland Weekend?" My inquiry dives into the initial draw of the festival by analyzing the overall fascination with apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction. The festival is inherently unique in its dedication to complete participation within a dystopian narrative – something I discuss in detail. I briefly outline the history of the genre of post-apocalyptic film and literature and examine its influence on pop-culture media as well as the human psyche. Why do Wastelanders love film franchises such as "*Mad Max*"? What about a post-apocalypse is so appealing to Wastelanders? Is it the fascination with death, or is it a message of hope and survival?

I continue to explore this theme of survival with a secondary question: "Why come back?" After their initial experience, many Wastelanders feel a powerful urge to return to the event, often while currently experiencing the festival. What surprises most Wastelanders is the sense of community that garners from the festival ethos and continues beyond its boundaries even after the event concludes. From this, we can observe that Wastelanders take the festival to mean something more than just a party in the desert, as they created their own subculture through their dedication to the people and the event itself: elements of world-building through lore, tribe-sponsored activities, hosting external events, and online presence all emphasize the valuation of community among Wastelanders, especially during times of uncertainty like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lastly, I observe the personal impact that Wasteland Weekend has on Wastelanders, asking: "How has Wasteland Weekend affected you?" While there is a community, Wastelanders experience the festival differently, and most undergo some form of positive change after attending the festival. I pursue the concept of identity within a subculture and how an individual can experience self-actualization from the festival, whether it be something life-changing or just tapping into parts of themselves that daily life rarely affords.

CHAPTER II

WHO KILLED THE WORLD?

AN IMMERSIVE JOURNEY TO THE POST-APOCALYPSE

The Theme

Apocalypticism & Post-Apocalypticism

The most distinguishable trait between Wasteland Weekend and other desert festivals is its dedication to complete immersion into its post-apocalyptic narrative. It is important to note that Wastelanders do not want an actual apocalypse; many often describe Wasteland as the "Hollywood" version of the post-apocalypse, with elements of hyperrealism saturated in dystopian hyperbole. What initially draws many Wastelanders to the festival is their love of *Mad Max* and other dystopian media. Which begs the question: why is the end of the world so fascinating? The popularity surrounding apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction illustrates the underlying fears and societal pressures at their creation. To better understand the post-apocalyptic genre, we must look at its precursor, the apocalypse. Brett Stifflemire, in his dissertation, *Visions of After The End: A History and Theory of The Post-apocalyptic Genre in Literature and Film*, gives a conceptual overview of the apocalypse:

> There are two common conceptions of the apocalypse—the popular and the traditional. In the popular sense, apocalyptic refers to the events, especially destruction and chaos, leading up to the end of the world. However, derived from the Greek word *apokalupsis*, apocalypse traditionally denotes revelation. Thus, in

> the traditional view, apocalypse is not only concerned with the end of the world but also the unveiling of a new world. The traditional myth of apocalypse emphasizes the revealing of a higher power, a higher order, that follows the end and which gives meaning to the end. (Stifflemire 3-4)

Even in the original mythos, the apocalypse signifies the end of one world while anticipating the rebirth of another. Of course, such events are typically illustrated as catastrophic, doing little to assuage the fears of the secular population; there will be a "new" world, but will we even see it? In a secular context, such fears may perpetuate feelings of fatalism and pessimism. According to folklorist Daniel Wojcik, fatalism and apocalypticism are often "responses to societal crises, the disintegration of previous ways of life, cultural conflict, and colonialism" (133). Some theorize apocalyptic beliefs are the subsequent result of relative deprivation, so those who experience oppression find solace and hope in believing in an alternative, "more perfect world" to correct the current imbalance and eliminate suffering whether brought about by economic, political, or other societal turmoil (133). Fatalism describes the attitude of hopelessness, or even nihilism, where an individual feels virtually powerless and utterly alienated in their ability to control their fate. Fatalism may tie to apocalyptic beliefs because of its relation to uncontrollable and inevitable disastrous events. Like fatalism, apocalypticism often is a response to the feeling of inevitable societal downfall beyond one's control, albeit under more catastrophic threats such as "nuclear war, economic collapse, environmental destruction, disease, famine, and increasing lawlessness" (136). According to Wojcik, the difference between religious and secular apocalypticism is the causality behind such events; secular apocalypticism is not triggered from or connected to belief in divine

forces, but rather by human error and ignorance; an apocalypse of our own making. Arguably, nothing prompts a feeling of utter helplessness and alienation more than the threat of nuclear annihilation.

During the Cold War, the introduction of nuclear weapons exacerbated the fears surrounding the fate of humanity, eventually causing prolonged psychological distress. Wojcik references psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton's theory of "psychic numbing," which, in the wake of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, describes the behavioral and psychological reaction to feelings caused by exposure to an overwhelming threat; often this "numbing" presents itself through:

> a sense of apathy and futility, the purposeful denial of thought about the bomb, and the belief that one personally can do nothing to avert inescapable doom, from which resignation ensues ('Well, if it happens, it happens-and it will happen to all of us') as well as cynicism ('They'll drop it all right and it will be the end of all of us--that's the way people are, and that will be that!'). Wojcik (138)

The mental and societal repercussions of nuclear weapons lead to Lifton's concept of "psychohistorical dislocation" that occurs towards the latter half of the 20th century. Wojcik likens this cultural transitional period to anthropologist Victor Turner's liminality theory, claiming that the same concept applies to periods in history where the culture is "betwixt and between" due to continued exposure to crises and an amplified sense of ambiguity. "Turner notes that liminal historical periods may evoke millenarian aspirations and scenarios, the imagery of which resembles a rite of passage, with similar themes of the destruction of the old condition, marginality and transition, and transformative rebirth involving the establishment of a new status or condition" (140).

Post-apocalyptic fiction recognizes the fragility of our current reality, which subsequently allows us to enter the liminal realm of possibility where the chance of survival is not only imminent but a testimonial of human resilience in the face of catastrophic events.

Post-apocalyptic fiction, as Claire P. Curtis defines, is "any account that takes up how humans start over after the end of life on earth as we understand it" (4). There is no distinguishable delineation from where apocalypse fiction ends and post-apocalyptic begins, except to exist in a state of ambiguity, a psychohistorical dislocation where both are true and untrue at the same time, creating a sense of mental dissociation between the pre-apocalyptic world and the post-facto apocalyptic one. Both apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction exist as a means of escapism. Wasteland Weekend co-creator Jared Butler expands on the influence of post-apocalypticism on the cultural milieu throughout history:

> I think there is a need for post-apocalyptic escapism that crops up – every generation, it seems to happen. And it's always a commentary on what is happening in the rest of the world. You see kind of apocalyptic literature that goes back even to the late 1800s. It goes back to even things like *War of the Worlds*. But you certainly see it in the 1930s; you see superheroes invented; you see larger-than-life characters and cataclysms because of the concerns people have with the Great Depression and the stock market crash in the late '20s. And then you see it again during the World Wars, you see it during famines and plagues and periods of uncertainty. When George Miller was doing *The Road Warrior*, that was very much a commentary on the gas shortages of the 1970s and how fragile the world's infrastructure might be because it was based on oil. In *Mad*

> *Max: Fury Road*, it's much more about a lack of water. But these things allow us to process fears of the way of the world around us, and the future of the world is unstable. (Butler)

Carnivalesque & Ritualesque

Interestingly, in their enactment of a post-apocalyptic world, the attitudes of Wastelanders almost mock or invert the nihilistic and helpless feelings of apocalyptic fatalism. "In this environment, it's not just: 'Oh, Wasteland Weekend is people barely making it by in the dregs of society,' it's like, 'No, we're having a party!'" ("Big Red"). They even satirize certain rituals within the *Mad Max* universe, such as the War Boys' – paramilitary servants of the main antagonist, Immortan Joe, in *Mad Max: Fury Road* – rites before acts of self-sacrifice: painting their mouths with chrome spray paint and yelling, "Witness me!" to mean "remember me and my deeds" as they travel to Valhalla, the afterlife. Wastelanders instead take the dramatic ritualistic yell of "witness me!" to draw attention to themselves completing simple tasks or sometimes to poke fun at their own clumsiness – a histrionic "look at this!" or "watch me!"

The welcoming mockery, the spectacle of the costumes, the redefinition or creation of a new identity, and the abandonment of the everyday social order all tie into the Wastelander subculture. According to Russian philosopher and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, festivals are a playful inversion of societal norms adopting a "carnivalesque" way of expression. Bakhtin's concepts of "carnival" and the "carnivalesque" heavily influenced festival culture theory and ultimately argued for the temporary social and political liberation of the common folk from authoritative powers – a time of "radical

expression" where people freely mocked rules without owing recompense. As a whole, Wasteland's disposition manifests multiple elements within Bakhtin's carnivalesque framework in its free and playful expressions. Carnivalesque-type events exhibit parody, community, feasting, costumes/masking, sensuality, creating a utopian "second world," inversion of social order, and expressive participation (Bakhtin 1968). Although, Wasteland is decidedly a dystopian second world, rather than a utopian, it is not an idealized Foucauldian heterotopia but a reactionary world build on the inevitable destruction of social order. Wasteland does not invert society but ostensibly and playfully annihilates it so they can rebuild it on the grounds of absurdity, violence, and fatalism.

Some examples of the carnivalesque at Wasteland include the exaggerated, grotesque humor and sexual imagery, as evidenced by thematic events such as the "slag races" where people race Wasteland-themed vibrators; or "Uncle Foster's Story Time," hosted by the tribe the "Northern Nomads," where Wastelander "Uncle Foster" humorously reads sex scenes from romance novels. "He will read erotica in a Scottish brogue voice, and we get everything from sound effects, and then I'm there as the designated heckler," explains Wastelander "Barter Jinx" who, along with Uncle Foster and "Spanky the Warmonger," co-leads the Northern Nomads. "So, if I notice that the energy is dying, I'll start doing heckling or I'll go grab a pickle out of a pickle jar and make it look like I'm doing the motions of what's being read." Uncle Foster reads three times throughout the day and gives bottle caps to all attendees. At the end of the third reading, they hold a raffle for those in attendance at all three readings. "Mostly the gifts are gag sex toys: penis squirt guns, 50s nude pinup cards, penis lighter, and whatever we happen to find during the year" ("Spanky"). Sexual humor, dark humor, and parody

within the Wasteland subculture are just a few examples of its tongue-in-cheek taxonomy as it portrays a hypersexualized and violent dystopian world.

Folklorist Barbara Babcock delves into a parataxic exploration into the components of clowning, comedy, and rituals similar to the undertones found in the carnivalesque. What looks like surface-level "play" is social commentary, a metaphysical and hyperbolic expression of the truths within the current reality. The seemingly disorganized discord of comedy is a playful reconfiguration of the familiar with a more serious subtext, "Comedy may be a spiritual shock comedy which breaks up the patterns of thought and rationality that hold us in bondage and in which the given and established order of things is deformed, reformed, and reformulated; a playful speculation on what was, is, or might be; a remark on the indignity of any closed system" (103). Babcock suggests that the functionality of ritual clowning goes beyond the purported "safety valve," and is a pragmatic self-examination in congruence with criticism from a comedic perspective, "Both clowning and criticism are 'sanctioned disrespect,' ways in which society paradoxically institutionalizes doubt and questioning" (107). This can manifest itself in literature, ritual, artistic expression. Much like Babcock's observations regarding clowning, Folklorist Beverly Stoeltje breaks down the concepts and characteristics of festivals, noting that festivals are more social commentary through play (261). She concludes while festival is seemingly playful, it contrasts with ritual in that it experiments with meaning while ritual tries to control it. Festival is a reflexive and metaphysical experience that gives social commentary, where an inversion or reversal of the social hierarchy essentially exposes the public to the realities that much

of the participants actively experience when not in the festival ethos. Stoeltje refers to this as "symbolic manipulation" (268).

Folklorist Jack Santino also explores the concepts of ritual and festival; he observes that certain social phenomena are not necessary for societal growth and success. In his efforts to codify behaviors and customs typical of ritual and festival, he offers an alternative genre to compensate for events that harbor elements of both: the "ritualesque." Santino argues that while rituals have noteworthy traits such as "performative use of symbols – image, music, movement – to effect social change," the carnivalesque garners the same ambition by employing a more indirect and ludic methodology: "festivity may, in fact, mask seriousness of purpose" (Santino 62). Wasteland offers a cohabitation of both festival and ritual in nature with its pursuit to create a dystopian conjectural reality. "While intentionality is perhaps impossible to determine in so many ways, we can see that some events are in themselves created to address certain issues and to effect change outside the actual locus of the event, while others are intended to provide engagement and entertainment within their own boundaries, both spacial [*sic*] and temporal" (67). Santino proposes that the ritualesque combines the symbolism of rituals and the instrumentalism of the carnivalesque. The relationship between the two, however, is not mutually exclusive;

> very often, festivity, celebration, and the carnivalesque are the modality of the ritualesque: they are the way norms are questioned and alternatives suggested. Beyond the subjunctive of festival, the 'what if' of it, are those events that actually do attempt, in their very enactment, to have an immediate effect on participants and society. (Santino 67)

While Wasteland is not utterly impenetrable to the outside world and its purpose is not intended to affect social change, it is a ubiquitous commentary on the modern world, given that a group of 5,000 people find camaraderie, self-discovery, and creative expression in a playful recreation of a post-apocalyptic world rather than their current reality. Santino quotes folklorist Linda Pershing who says such events "'experiment in alternate visions of the world'" (Santino 62).

Dystopian Dark Tourism

"Dark Tourism," a concept coined initially by hospitality and tourism subject-matter experts Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon, describes the nexus point in which tourism's consumerist nature meets the fascination with death through immersion at the sites of horrific events. Dark tourism destinations are often sites associated with death and tragedy, such as battlefields, prisons, museums, and memorials, e.g., Holocaust museums and concentration camps, or the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The focus of dark tourism research is not on death or the dark, twisted themes themselves but rather a study of the living – those who engage in dark touristic journeys and their motivations. Researcher J.S. Podoshen and their team delve into the principal motivation behind exposure to such activities. "More frequent exposure makes people become more conscious about death, with some thinking that the fear of death cannot be conquered by denying it, but by directly facing it… Thus, the fear of death can be abated by passive desensitization" (Podoshen et al. 318). Podoshen et al. cast a broader net to include those who embrace taboo topics and explore theories on violence and dystopia consumption within dark tourism, "Dystopian Dark Tourism" (DDT). The inclusion of dystopian fascination in the DDT framework touches on the concept of dystopia as a "failed

utopia." Podoshen et al. posit a cautionary tale on the dangers of utopian propaganda and consumerism:

> Where the Dark Tourism model explains how dark tourism provides a means to confront the inevitability of death, our model provides a means to confront the inevitability of utopia gone awry that may or may not involve death (but often does)…DDT allows tourists to engage in making sense of the process, the aesthetics and the emotion of the dystopia. (Podoshen et al. 324)

Wasteland Weekend contains elements of a DDT experience. Most people generally consider dystopias post-apocalyptic, especially those created through cataclysmic events that lead to the decline of society, and the fascination with apocalypticism and catastrophic events provides participants an "immersive experience" boasted by such events. The motivations behind participating "are centered on individual and cultural explorations steeped in violence, dehumanization and even preparation (for catastrophic events) as reasons to engage in dark tourism" (Podoshen et al. 325). There are more extreme post-apocalyptic enthusiasts who attend Wasteland, so-called "preppers," who believe the apocalypse is imminent. Gateway elaborates on the comparison between preppers to the average Wastelander, "They're definitely a weird, small group that go to Wasteland going, 'This is my preparedness for the apocalypse!' I'm like, 'Dude, there's a porta-potty right there and a food vendor right there. Chill,'" He laughs. "There's definitely a very huge difference between the prepper who wants the end of the world so he can be the king of his castle and the hardcore Wastelander who understands this is fiction." He continues, "And at the same time, there is still a melding of the two. I don't know many Wastelanders, that are friends of mine, that we don't prep,

because you don't know. We all have some level of prepping. We're not hardcore preppers with bunkers or, you know, 'I've got a tank in the back.' But we all do some level of prepping just to be sure."

While Wastelanders are technically visiting when they come to the annual event, they do not consider themselves "tourists" because they help construct and participate in the simulation. There is also little consumerism, as Wasteland functions mainly on barter (exchange) rather than on monetary profit. The experience is not so much a desensitizing simulation to cope with a devastating catastrophic event but instead, it shifts the discourse to focus from the fascination with death and destruction to a celebration of survival. Wasteland not only allows Wastelanders to have an immersive dystopian experience in the wake of a mock-apocalypse but permits attendees to create their journey as an individual simulation of survivalism. As Podoshen et al. note, "In this way, DDT functions as both an antidote for the banal and means to preserve the complexity of social and psychical reality from its disappearance via the cosmetic remodeling of aesthetic experience" (323). Wastelanders do not see the end of the world as a punishment but as a possible opportunity to start over; while their survival is not guaranteed, they continue to reassemble the world they once knew from the existing rubble.

Survivalism

Claire P. Curtis emphasizes that the function of post-apocalyptic fiction is to address the fears behind uncontrollable, drastic changes leading to the demise or extinction of the current reality, and describes the phenomenon as a cathartic way to alleviate the fear or encourage the need to prevent it from happening. She also notes its

paradoxical and simultaneous ability to put forward the idea of starting over; "I would argue that most readers of postapocalyptic fiction think of themselves as survivors of such accounts and they read this fiction as a kind of how-to manual" (Curtis 10). Post-apocalyptic fiction is metadiscursive in its self-reflective commentary on how the pitfalls of current behavior will inevitably lead us to destruction. "Postapocalyptic fiction reconfigures the conditions under which humans live and demands that humans rethink their premises for peaceful living together. Postapocalyptic fiction moves humans from the state of nature through the social contract and to a new civil society" (Curtis 10). It forces the penultimate "what if?" scenario and offers a commentary on the human condition in the face of utter disaster; from there, it becomes an opportunity to rebuild.

"If you're an academic, you'll get a kick out of this," says Wastelander "Big Red" while digging through their things off-screen during our interview. After a minute, they excitedly present a small, oddly shaped device called a "Gömböc." A Gömböc is a three-dimensional homogeneous shape that contains one stable and one unstable equilibrium point. When set on any of its surfaces, it will self-correct to its singular point of stable equilibrium. The closest thing to a Gömböc in nature would be the shape of a turtle's shell, allowing the animal to pull itself upright after falling on its back. "It's just this weird little object that no matter what, it's always going to rotate and right itself in a way that it kind of settles back upright – like a higher-dimensional weeble, or something," Big Red explains. They purchased the Gömböc after attending their first Wasteland in 2015 as a testament to their experience. Like several Wastelanders I interviewed, Big Red encountered Wasteland at a time of significant upheaval in their life. This unusual example of self-correction, rarely found in nature, to represent the optimism found

through personal (or global) destruction, provides a tangible representation of the idea that "it doesn't matter which way you get put down, you can find your way back upright again" (Big Red). It is similar to the end-times optimism captured in the saying popularized by John Lennon: "Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end." While Wasteland organizers do not promote the event as anything more than a party in the desert, some Wastelanders, much like their penchant to expand their creative prowess, take the post-apocalyptic theme to mean something more. "You are never truly without agency or truly without – you're never powerless, even in the nukes have fallen, you're scavenging for scraps or whatever the circumstance you can imagine is. And it's not just that it's not hopeless, it's that it can become hopeful" (Big Red).

Wasteland grounds itself in a more "Hollywood" version of the post-apocalypse, but it evokes the feeling among some Wastelanders that there are opportunities to reconstruct the boundaries of a society that no longer exists. During my interviews with Wastelanders, many shared with me why they find the post-apocalyptic genre intriguing. Wastelanders like "Gogurt" see it all as a social commentary on the shared fears in times of strife:

> I think in the parts of us that always wonder: is this weird, insane experiment called civilization, really going to continue to hold together? And it's easy to get scared and look at how if we tug at the threads, we may realize that the fabric of everything that we know to be true might be a bit more fragile than we would like. And it's interesting because I think post-apocalypse sheds some commentary on that. (Gogurt)

His comments mirror Curtis's sentiments and address those fears but in a way that is emblematic of the Wastelander mentality.

> I think the appeal is very much similar there in the idea that, "Here's what we're all scared of. Here's what we all ultimately fear. The collapse of everything we hold dear. And let's just have fun with that." It would be like catharsis, associated with showing here's some very real stories about how people would persevere through that environment and how the human condition in the human spirit would remain undaunted in the face of literally the worst possible outcome. (Gogurt)

Wastelanders like "Shines" tie the fantasy to its original intent of escapism, "You're breaking away from the shackles of society and expectations. You're going out into the middle of nowhere and there are no more obligations…It's the end of the world, and you're worried about your survival… I think that there is a part of us that really enjoys that wild side of just dropping everything at the door and living in the end of the world." Some, like Gateway, find the idea of self-sustainability attractive:

> It's a certain level of freedom, but the reality of that freedom being heavy responsibility. You can go with any number of directions with just the idea of, let's say, everything disappears except for the resources, and suddenly you're a king of your own castle, kind of deal. . . . But I like the post-apocalypse because it's also still so grounded in reality in that something horrible has happened and horrible things continue to happen. . . . It's also the idea of the post-apocalypse is more of a rebirth. It's rising out of the ashes, so it really is just a recreation kind of idea. (Gateway)

Butler shares similar sentiments, reflecting on what the post-apocalypse ultimately means for human survival. “It’s a hopeful commentary on how there is something after; there is a post-apocalypse. It is not just the end of the world as we know it, it is the end of the world as we know it but a birth of a new world.” The fantasy allows those to play with the idea of building something better and more liberating than its predecessor, and in doing so, creating a space for people to redefine themselves as well. “You might become someone who is more important or more brave or more just simply uninhibited” (Butler). Wastelander “Firebird,” sees it as a reflection of human adaptability in their pursuit to rebuild:

> And so that belief in human spirit is why I like the idea of rebuilding and why I like the idea of the apocalypse, because the apocalypse, as we call it, which is not really a full apocalypse, it’s a setback, is all it is. That’s the thing. A nuclear war that leaves five percent of humanity intact? That’s just a setback. Those five percent of us, we’re just going to get right back to work rebuilding the world. (Firebird)

Postmodernism

Post-apocalyptic narratives explore the fundamentals behind postmodernism in its deconstruction of objective truths, finding alternative meaning from the fragmentary and non-linear nature of the human experience. Brett Stifflemire explains that postmodernism “desires to break from the modern metanarratives of progress, decentering meaning by disconnecting present images from their past meanings, allowing for unresolved conclusions, and highlighting texts constructedness through self reflexivity” (273). The

post-apocalyptic alternative reality disrupts the narrative of societal progression during periods of enlightenment within the modern world. It deviates from the metanarrative of a more "advanced" civilization by dismantling structures and subsequently halting meanings of the past from continuing forward. "In this synchronic world, artifacts from the past have been disconnected from their referents in the past, losing their previous meanings due to a postmodernist disruption of the signifying chain" (Stifflemire 273). The disconnect is only the first step; the dismantling allows postmodern architects to use whatever tools are available to create new methods and means of relative truth. Postmodern literature exercises intertextuality, a practice where a text's meaning emerges from an amalgamation of other written works; such a practice constitutes the same pastiche found in post-apocalyptic fiction. "Formally, post-apocalyptic texts are themselves reconstructed from fragments of other texts and genres, which both reflects the patchwork worlds of the narratives and also demonstrates the post-apocalyptic loss of faith in meaning, order, and structure" (Stifflemire 6).

Bricolage

> Did you ever try to put a broken piece of glass back together? Even if the pieces fit, you can't make it whole again the way it was. But if you're clever, you can still use the pieces to make other useful things. Maybe even something wonderful, like a mosaic. Well, the world broke just like glass. And everyone's trying to put it back together like it was, but it'll never come together in the same way. (Moira Brown, *Fallout 3*).

French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss conceived the idea of *bricolage* to define craftsmanship through limited and heterogeneous means – limited in terms of resources and heterogeneous to mean its composite nature. Although the idea of bricolage has become a familiar concept in literary studies and textual analysis, as folklorist Daniel Wojcik reminds us, in its original meaning as proposed by Lévi-Strauss, it refers to the construction of mythologies and to the creation of monumental vernacular wonderments, such as *Le Palais Idéal* ("Ideal Palace") built by the postman Ferdinand Cheval (1836–1924) in southeastern France, from 1879 to 1912 (Wojcik 146). Essentially, the act of bricolage is to construct new things or meanings with the tools and materials available, or as Wojcik puts it, the bricoleur is "a do-it-yourself inventor, a resourceful jack-of-all trades creating with scrap, leftovers, and odds and ends" (Wojcik 144, 146). Lévi-Strauss maintained that those who utilize bricolage are the opposite of engineers, who use new, raw tools for each project and seek to go beyond the confines of their surroundings. In contrast, the bricoleur either chooses to or cannot stray from their current state, which allows them to consistently utilize or redefine their toolset, often found from previous projects or "whatever is at hand" (Lévi-Strauss 17). With those limited resources, the bricoleur uses things in such a way that there is no singular use according to Levi-Strauss:

> Such elements are specialized up to a point, sufficiently for the 'bricoleur' not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use. They each represent a set of actual and possible relations; they are 'operators' but they can be used for any operations of the same type (18).

As noted, Lévi-Strauss attributes this creative form of expression to the idea of mythical thought, which also expresses itself through heterogeneous means, which in our current era elicits the fundamentals behind postmodern views regarding the truth. In order to find the true meaning of an object and overcome its resistance, we must dismantle it. With words that resonant today, Lévi-Strauss observes that "Mythical thought for its part is imprisoned in the events and experiences which it never tires of ordering and re-ordering in its search to find them a meaning. But it also acts as a liberator by its protest against the idea that anything can be meaningless with which science at first resigned itself to a compromise" (22). Expanding upon the ideas of Lévi-Strauss and applying the concept of bricolage to subcultures, subcultural theorist J. Patrick Williams posits that subculturalists are themselves examples of post-modernist ideals through bricolage methodology because they "rearrange the symbolic meanings attached to mainstream cultural objects" (Williams 61). Much like previous bricoleurs, subculturalists create new meanings in addition to things and style.

Subcultural Style

Some theorists, such as subcultural theorist Dick Hebdige, attribute style as the determinate qualifier of subculture, often citing the youth punk culture of the 1970s: "In the gloomy, apocalyptic ambience of the late 1970s…it was fitting that the punks should present themselves as 'degenerates'; as signs of the highly publicized decay which perfectly represented the atrophied condition of Great Britain" (Hebdige 87). The punk movement espouses largely anti-establishmentarian ideologies that influenced their subcultural style through their emblematic do-it-yourself music, art, literature, and other

various media. Although many label it as a "counterculture," what punk actually symbolizes is the synthesis of different styles, which result in the rejection of the mass culture in which it resides. From this, the punk culture shows signs of bricolage and postmodernism through its ability to create new forms of subcultural identity and artistic movements (Ensminger 2011, Hebdige 1981, Leblanc 1999, and Wojcik 1995). What is interesting is Hebdige's observation of the "apocalyptic" environment that may have contributed to the punk movement, which attributes the failures of society birthing new kinds of rebellion through wanton behavior and dress as an aversion to their current reality.

The introduction of nuclear annihilation to the mid-20th century postwar zeitgeist generated another conjectural movement featuring retro-futuristic styles called "cyberpunk." New Wave science fiction authors throughout the 1960s and 1970s took cyberpunk as a means to explore the possibilities of postmodernism, where the imagined future results in a dystopian setting, typically when the highest advances in technology meet the lowest point of social order. Cyberpunk has many derivatives, specifically subgenres, centered around conceptual futures influenced by the historical technology of their corresponding eras, such as atompunk with its mid-20th century Atomic Age technology and steampunk with its technology from the Steam Age. Dieselpunk elevates the concept behind an alternative dystopian society that relies on diesel-powered technology at the apex of societal decline. Wasteland's dieselpunk stylistic influence is an exhibition of the self-reflexive paradigm often found in postmodernism, where elements of the past cobble together to produce new meaning within a post-apocalyptic world. This particular subgenre of cyberpunk illustrates the *Mad Max* universe, where

cars and gasoline are the determinants between life and death, which is a crucial influence upon the Wastelanders' effort to build a new world in a wasteland. In this regard, Wastelanders are bricoleurs in their limitless DIY creativity and repurposing of things, surpassing punk-style bricolage and other youth subcultural styles, most of which eventually became somewhat clichéd and "solidified" and were quickly incorporated into mainstream culture and mass-marketed as a commodity (Hebdige 1985, Ensminger 2011, Wojcik 1995).

Hebdige looks at style as the underlying homology of subculture, a common language among participants. Style creates a sense of cohesion and definition among subculturalists, putting an alternative or antithetical use towards something to make it inherently unique to that particular style. Although in creating that sense of style, therein runs the risk of subcultural defusion – appropriation and commodification, or incorporation – through stylistic diffusion – the spread of subcultural style outside its point of origin. Wastelander "Needle" ruminates: "I kind of wish I got to go to Wasteland when it first started to watch it grow every year and seeing it just grow and grow and grow and grow. But still, even at this point, you can go to Wasteland and still experience, it's still at its purity." Needle compares it to the larger, more popular desert festival, Burning Man: "it's so big, it's almost too big. Like you get lost in it." The "purity" of which she speaks refers to the distinctiveness of Wasteland, in fear of the subcultural defusion, which is what some accuse Burning Man of becoming. Wastelander "Nomad" shares Needle's trepidation about the festival's getting to be too large, "because sometimes when things are small, there's that magic and then they grow to the point where the vision is diluted and/or there wasn't good mentoring that happened. So, the

magic of what it is was sort of lost as it grew so quickly." But she has faith in how protective the community is in its pursuits to maintain their "vision." Some, like Wastelander "Fatal the Swordmaster," did get to witness the earlier years of Wasteland and expresses excitement regarding the festival's evolution:

> The car game has...I think the first year I went, there might have been like six *Mad Max* replicas, which, at the time, I was just like, "This is awesome." And even in 2011, it had a tiny little Thunderdome…But now it's this giant Thunderdome and hundreds of cars and thousands of people. And [I said]…"Well, this is more awesome!" It was almost like I was in a time capsule and then I was released into this new version of it last year…but it was really wild to see how it had grown. And I'm curious to see how much it will grow the next time that we're able to gather again. (Fatal the Swordmaster)

Those who critique Dick Hebdige's subcultural analysis, such as David Muggleton, accuse Hebdige's armchair theories of lacking real-life application. Muggleton further developed his own earlier ideas which suggest that subcultures had gone extinct, and then concluded instead that subcultures are not extinct but evolved with the help of postmodernism. "Subculturalists are postmodern in that they demonstrate a fragmented, heterogenous and individualistic stylistic identification. This is a liminal sensibility that manifests itself as an expression of freedom from structure, control and restraint, ensuring that stasis is rejected in favour of movement and fluidity" (Muggleton 158). He attributes postmodernist tendencies as the contributor to subcultures' flexibility and adaptability. His "post-subculturalist" concept contradicts Hebdige's, and he theorizes that style, while emblematic to subcultural identity, is relatively superficial and

meaningless. Williams, in contrast, considers subcultural style as more meaningful: "Subculturalists create new forms of demeanor, behavior, or talk, just as they create new clothing, art, or music. Style depicts much more than an impotent 'class consciousness'; it represents the self-consciousness of its creators in both an individualistic and collective sense" (Williams 62).

To explain the vernacular and community-based influences of the style, Wasteland co-creator Jared Butler says,

> It had already started prior to 2015 that people were doing their own original creations, more so than copying the films. And then, in 2015, we had *Mad Max*: *Fury Road* come out, and there was a big influx of people wearing costumes directly from that film. But since then, that's still there but because we've been around for so long, what you see now are rather than people taking inspiration from films, video games, whatever, people are taking inspiration from other Wastelanders. They are seeing someone else's look, and they are riffing on it and expanding it and being inspired by it to create their own thing. And it builds and builds on itself. And that's why now I think we really have our own look, our own fashion, our own kind of subculture that is only tangentially related to some of these existing intellectual properties. (Butler)

For Butler, Wastelander style is arguably an example of folk or vernacular excorporation – creating new subcultural meaning through the appropriation and repurposing of mass culture. By building on the *Mad Max* franchise as a stylistic framework and combining the juxtaposing elements of punk bricolage, Wasteland subculture managed to create its own style, even coining the verbiage "Wastelanding" to describe Wastelanders' stylistic

liberties when constructing their own content; this further illustrates the concepts of autonomy, consistent distinctiveness, identity, and commitment within a subculture (as per Hodkinson).

The Wasteland subculture exemplifies the ideas surrounding postmodernism and bricolage in their pursuit to repurpose or find new meaning in that which already exists. They build the world around them from tools and materials left behind in the wake of mass destruction. Some Wastelanders apply this approach while developing their costumes or tribes like Nomad. She is a founder of "cimotA," at present the only all-women tribe at Wasteland. The tribe presents a "dirt witch" facade, and Nomad and core member "Yaga" based their tribe origins around the fundamentals behind superstition and earthly connections as a means of survival. The small tribe has five elders who are "seers," or those who practice different methods of divination, such as self-made tarot cards, palm-reading, and throwing bones. Their tent, or "Hovel," serves as a respite for weary travelers, and offers shade, readings, and crafting workshops to other Wastelanders. The Hovel design emulates a trash heap, assembling what was left behind to create a source of protection against the harsh desert climate. cimotA's lore reflects that of postmodern bricolage by rejecting the symbolism from the "old world," or pre-apocalypse world; it begins several generations after the "Fall" or "Scorch," which left behind only stories to pass down to those living in the current reality. From those stories, they create new meanings from existing or "found" objects,

> somebody would say, 'Oh, that's a candleholder,' to us wasn't a candleholder, it was something else. So, we make clever use of objects that in the old world would

have been a cheese grater but to us, it's a lantern shade. You know, we put a light in it, that sort of thing. We always twist what the usage is. (Nomad)

Through this approach, they can create their own texts and symbols, literally. cimotA created their own glyphs and symbols to represent each seer; even the tribe name, "cimotA," is a palindrome of "Atomic."

While some Wastelanders reject the old meanings of the past, some use them through historical references to create their tribes. For example, one of the more prominent sub-themes at Wasteland is pirates. Post-apocalyptic-pirate crossover is relatively common. An obvious example in pop culture is the film *Waterworld*, set in the near-distant future when the polar ice caps melt, causing the sea levels to rise and eventually cover the entire planet with water. What remains of human civilization now lives on floating makeshift communities called "atolls." The film received mixed reviews upon release but has since become a cult classic among post-apocalyptic aficionados, especially Wastelanders, considering the film's writers, Peter Rader and David Twohy, took inspiration from *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior.* The film did receive significant praise for its set design which has made an appearance at Wasteland. One of the tribes managed to acquire the small-scale prop ship used in the film, the Exxon Valdez ("The Deez"); it became a prominent feature at Wasteland, and the tribe hosted an annual swimsuit competition on board. Unfortunately, due to its increased safety hazards, the tribe had to retire The Deez in 2019.

Another Wastelander called "The Beef," co-created the dystopian archipelago karaoke bar and tribe "Bikini Atoll." Beef says, "I'm a huge atomic nut, I love atomic energy and big bombs and stuff like that, so it seemed to me that Bikini Atoll was the

best way to tie in a tiki bar into a post-apocalyptic society." Beef has plans to make the exterior of the bar look like a crashed bomber plane to fit the tribe's lore, where they crashed their bomber in the desert, leaving them stranded with little left to do except "sing songs and get drunk." They adorned the bar, as it stands, with palm trees, bamboo, and other tiki paraphernalia, but with a twist: "Our mascot was a creation by one of our tribemates…it's a two-headed mermaid that's connected at the torso, she has three seashells [laughs], wearing leis, and then her mermaid tail is made entirely out of beer cans" (Beef).

Wastelanders adopt the bricoleur mindset that they live in a post-apocalyptic world with limited resources; therefore, to create new things to maintain a suitable lifestyle, they must scavenge. There is a strong emphasis on and valuation of scavenging at Wasteland. While scavenging to a Wastelander is not a means of survival, most Wastelanders mainly rely on their ability to scavenge and repurpose materials for their Wasteland gear. Gateway humorously warns, "You'll know a Wastelander if you see someone pull off to the side of the road and go running at a leather couch with a knife," he laughs, "because they are scavenging the leather for a costume." Not two days after making this claim did someone post to the NorCal Wastelanders Facebook page that someone was giving away a leather couch on Facebook Marketplace. "Just saw this beautiful amount of leather for free on marketplace!" Another Wastelander commented on the post, "I've definitely harvested the leather from a couch. With a straight razor. By street-light."

> There's the little ways, the noticeable ways, like you look at a piece of trash or, you know, like a shirt that I would throw out under any other circumstances

> because, duh. All of a sudden, that goes into a special pile that gets locked away to be weathered and turned into some tapestry or some flag or something that I drape on myself. It completely changed my way that I look at a lot of just garbage that's laying around my house. Suddenly, these are craft projects. (Gogurt)

According to folklorist Dan Ben-Amos, folklore is an "artistic process" that can communicates meaning values within a folk group (Ben-Amos 12). He notes that this occurs in "small groups," but larger folk groups can similarly communicate such expressions. The seemingly limitless versatility of bottlecap creativity is an example of such artistic folkloric communication through recognizable material culture, sharing cultural significance among Wastelanders.

> I think that that spirit of imbuing meaning into things is really present in Wasteland and visible there, because the objects you're talking about are garbage [laughs]. I mean, in that way where it's like you can have a bottle cap and it can mean what you want it to mean. And I really love that philosophy in my just general life about being in the moment, being present, this can be meaningful, this can be beautiful, if you really let it be. (Big Red)

With an emphasis on a scavenger lifestyle and faced with the harsh reality of mortality, post-apocalypticism exists within the same sphere as survivalism, and at their core, Wastelanders are arguably an autocratic fringe society that seeks to redefine and rebuild.

CHAPTER III

IN THIS BLIGHTED PLACE, WE LEARNED TO LIVE AGAIN: BUILDING A DYSTOPIAN WORLD AND A COMMUNITY

World-Building

While many attend the festival for their love for the post-apocalyptic theme, many return for the opportunity to participate in collaborative world-building. Narratology scholar Marie-Laure Ryan breaks down the components of a world as a "connected set of objects and individuals; habitable environment; reasonably intelligible totality for external observers; field of activity for its members" (Ryan 91). World-building allows contributors the freedom to play within its self-contained narrative. "Really, it's like being a kid again and the playground is tailor-made because you have a fort in it, you know? You got a fort, you're playing and they're playing, too, and everybody agrees on the lexicon. They agree on the rules. They agree on everything," says Nomad. Rather than a well-known canon understood amongst participants at a comic book convention, for example, there is a more recognizable degree of personable realism at Wasteland, "Here, you are bringing your own wants and desires, your own aesthetic, your own sense of justice and fun, and fill-in-the-blanks. To this and your piece, you become greater [in] that the whole becomes greater than your piece, and therein lies the magic that happens with Wasteland" (Nomad).

Even the event location allows Wastelanders to explore beyond the means of realism. The desert atmosphere of Wasteland is indicative of Victor Turner's exploration of liminality: "In liminality the novice enters a ritual time and space that are betwixt and

between those ordered by the categories of past and future mundane social existence" (Turner and Turner 202). The desert setting of Wasteland possesses vast, sweeping landscapes with endless possibilities. Lying on the outskirts of civilization, battling the unforgiving elements, therein lies the freedom of lawlessness within a liminal space. "It was always very important to us that the location of the event – that we couldn't see any 'civilization' for 360 degrees because we wanted to put people out in a new and different world" (Butler). In order to create the "world" of Wasteland, the event grounds have a grid-like organization, consisting of theme zones separated by streets named after various apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic media such as "Damnation Alley," "Buzzard Lane," and "The Road." Wasteland City lies at the front and requires complete thematic participation, separating itself from the rest of the grounds by the emblematic "Wasteland" sign and towering front gates; it is where a majority of festival events and operations take place, such as the Thunderdome, music and entertainment, and bartering. Outside the city, there are varying gradients enforcing thematic participation, with looser restrictions the farther away Wastelanders camp from Wasteland City. Although Wasteland City limits end at "Fury Road," beyond it lies the official theme zones, where Wastelanders must still participate in the theme and apply to camp. After the official theme zones lie designated open camping zones; some zones have an optional theme where similarly-styled Wastelanders can camp together. For example, "Nuclear Winter" adheres to survivors of nuclear war theme, where they may band together to develop a religion devoted to the nuclear bomb, the "Temple of the Nuke," or "The Redoubt," which has an ex-military theme where former military units have finally emerged from their bunkers after a long-fought war and must maintain order amongst themselves to

survive. Some zones are staff-only camping, such as “Fort Kickass.” Towards the rear of the festival lies more open camping zones that have less restrictive theme guidelines. Should Wastelanders not feel the need to theme their campsite, or if they prefer to come with an RV, they can do so in zones like “RV Blockade” or “The Wilds.”

Wastelander Jameson is a professional welder and works for the Wasteland Weekend build crew, building principal structures such as the Atomic Cafe, the movie theatre, the main stage, the communications center, and main gates.

> Working from sunrise to practically sunset, building a world that wasn't there before, and it's really amazing. One of the years, I took pictures from down the street of what it looks like every time I woke up and started walking down. And you can see this, and then this, and then this. And, you know, it's like SimCity. You're building a world that people are coming to hang out at. (Jameson)

Even though the layout consists of grids and zones, the world of Wasteland is flexible and ever-changing, presenting new additions that eventually become staples to the Wasteland experience, like new theme zones, entertainment acts, or events, not just from one year to the next, but from day to day.

> If you walk down a street on Wednesday, the first day of the event, by Friday that street's going to be different…there's so much activity you can bounce from one thing to another, and they just do it all over again, and it's still a good thing because it's different people, different music, different environment, even though it's the same structure you just visited an hour ago (Jameson).

The magnitude of their endeavors to produce thematically appropriate costumes, cars, camps, and events makes it unfeasible for Wastelanders to experience everything throughout the festival:

> You're never going to see it all. You're never going to do it all. You're never going to meet everybody. As much as you want to, it's just not possible. So it's almost like you have to keep going back, because then if the former year you met the tribes, this year you get to see the events and then next year you can go to the theater and do the competitions, and then the year after that you can do the cars. There's so much to see and do that you want to keep going. You want to keep going. (Shines)

With everyone contributing to the open-ended narrative of Wasteland, it creates an entirely immersive and versatile experience for Wastelanders. While the narrative is a foundational agent in their world-building, it does not manifest itself in every Wastelander's experience. World-building theorist Mark J.P. Wolf writes, "Recognizing that the experience of a world is different and distinct from that of merely a narrative is crucial to seeing how worlds function apart from the narratives set within them, even though the narratives have much to do with the worlds in which they occur, and are usually the means by which the worlds are experienced" (Wolf 11). Many compare Wasteland's design to open-world role-playing video games (RPGs); open-world games allow players to experience the game freely, rather than following an obstinate, linear storyline. This gameplay gives players a sense of autonomy, completing missions and side-quests at their own leisure. "The one thing I tell everybody, 'It's like an RPG game: talk to everyone. Everyone.' Big letters," says Wastelander "The Barker." "Because

you're going to find somebody that either likes something that you're doing or you're going to like something that they're gonna do and then all of a sudden you're getting dragged off on some sort of wacky adventure you didn't even know you were going to go on." A consistent recommendation to first-time Wastelanders is to not go in with a plan and instead experience what Wasteland has to offer at that moment. "You're not going to know what you're going to do until you're there," advises Gateway. "You have no idea what shenanigans you're going to get into, what the layout is going to be, what new friends you're going to make, what new memories you're going to make because they're all going to be memories that, if you remember them [laughs], are going to be unforgettable."

Wastelanders' dedication to the act of world-building garners enthusiasm, not only to return to Wasteland annually but also to contribute to the community. "Someone is inspired or excited by something someone else has created, whether it be a costume, a car or campsite, performance, whatever it is, and it inspires them. And a year later, they come back with something of their own because that's their way of giving back," says Butler. "They want to say, 'Hey, you inspired me creatively and now I want you to see what I've done. And this is my way of saying thank you.' You know, it's a way of kind of giving back some love and it just builds and builds. And it's the reason why people exhaust themselves and spend a lot of money for something ephemeral and keep coming back to do it."

Such behaviors are emblematic of fan culture and participatory culture. Daniel Wojcik described fan culture as: "communities formed around a shared enjoyment of an aspect of popular culture, such as books, movies, TV shows, music, bands, sports or

sports teams, etc." (Wojcik 2021). Gatherings such as conventions, exclusive groups or clubs, and fan costume art (or cosplay) express elements of vernacular/folk creativity exhibit elements of folkloric expression. Participatory culture further describes the various degrees of fandom participation, where fans "take elements from mass mediated texts such as comics, film, and television, video games and literature, and creatively rework these to create their own lively fan culture (a process often referred to as 'textual poaching')" (Wojcik 2021). Theorist Henry Jenkins in his study of *Star Trek* fandom, defined participatory culture to include lenient boundaries regarding "artistic expression and civic engagement;" strong emphasis on contributions as well as support for the creators as well as creations among the community; informal mentorships where seasoned members share wisdom to newcomers; and compassion towards social relationships (Jenkins, 2009). Participation in cultural events is also a key factor in better understanding a culture from within. The individual has many means in which to participate, but ultimately "if those in attendance are primarily observers or consumers rather than participants, the event is not based in the social life of the community" (Stoeltje 266). Festival provide multiple ways for individuals to participate because they wish to emulate a welcoming environment for all kinds of participants. "Festival offers opportunities for wide participation because its general purpose is relevant to all group members It therefore attracts separate social interests, recognizing difference within the confines of the social group" (266).

Despite survivalism illustrated as an individual undertaking, the cooperative collaboration between the Wasteland organization and the community contributes not just to the event but to the underlying message of the participatory nature of the Wasteland

subculture. The desert setting may allow for a completely immersive experience, but in reality, desert camping as a sole endeavor is rather difficult, so the desert also creates a space where Wastelanders have to rely on one another to survive. “If you look at the storyline of this whole thing, Wasteland Weekend is supposed to be all these survivors coming from all over the place to come together. And they're not coming together to broker some peace deal or something like that. They're coming together to rebuild. And that's the greatest part of it,” says Wastelander “Evil Bink.” “You see these people, everyone, working together for a common goal. Yes, it's dystopian, yes, everything is destroyed but, you know, as cheesy it sounds, out of destruction comes beauty. And I think that's when you see literally this town being built in the middle of nowhere from garbage, it can't help but make me feel awesome. So being part of that is very enlightening.”

Community

Moreover, it is the impact of the community that leads many Wastelanders to return to future events. “It's really the people. I mean, the art and everything is great, but you know, not seeing somebody for a year and then running up and giving them a big hug because you haven't seen them in forever, that's the payoff. I mean, at least for me,” says Beef. “I've met a lot of people through Wasteland, and the best thing about Wasteland is that it's an excuse for – no matter how far away you live or where you come from or whatever, once a year, it's like a promise that we're all going to see each other” (Beef). Jameson also shared the impact the community has on him, “I go out there to hang out with the people that I know are as crazy as I am and, you know, just spend time with

these people…I was able to enrich my life through the people that I've met there, the experiences I've had there" (Jameson).

Despite the intimidating facade, raising their middle fingers at each other with an accompanying "Fuck you!" greeting, or giving each other the "Wasteland Salute" – two middle fingers crossed with their thumbs out, forming the shape of a "W" – the common consensus among Wastelanders is how open and welcoming the community is towards each other and especially newcomers (the "fuck you!" is Wastelander for: "Hi," "Bye," and "I love you, buddy"). Many commented that the kindness of the community contributed to their first Wasteland experience by offering food, water, and shelter to complete strangers to ensure they felt safe and welcomed. The overall friendly attitude within the Wasteland community is unusual in a purportedly aggressive setting, but it shifts the idea that the post-apocalypse is primarily a hostile space and survival is an individual endeavor. "Everyone is nice. You wouldn't expect the end of the world to be so nice. It's to a point where it's kind of disgusting," says The Barker. "But it's wonderful because you see somebody who has a giant axe or a huge weapon, 'I like your stuff!' And they light up, like they light up like a little kid, going, 'Thank you!' And they break character and you're like, 'Haha! I got you to break character!' But you know, you feel good about it, and they feel good about it." Apart from the positive environment, many Wastelanders describe the community as something intrinsically unique, often referring to it as their "family." "You meet people and for whatever circumstance you're thrown together, you just have that thing where it's like you're driven to see them over and over and over again… So, it's really like family. I want to go see my family" (Evil Bink).

> One of the things that I also found was a family that I didn't think I would ever find; I was expecting a lot of just alone… And at Wasteland, I found those people… Every single time they see me, they always say, "We're so proud of you for getting your life together. We're so proud of you for doing what you're doing and the fact that you're completing what you want to complete and that we know we're going to see you again," because that's just how our family is because it is a family. Wasteland is a family. (“Lady Cassandra the War Priestess”)

Collective Effervescence & Communitas

Under a singular event, the shared feeling of community and togetherness summons considerably a “collective effervescence” amongst Wastelanders. Scholar Tim Olaveson compares Emile Durkheim’s concept of collective effervescence and Victor Turner’s *communitas*, noting the similarities in their respective models and ritual structures. Durkheim, a French sociologist who believed in a structural-functionalist idea where social institutions exist to meet the needs of society, proposed the idea of collective consciousness, the shared values which unify societies. He expanded on this concept in the context of religion, citing its more centralized gatherings and rituals as a “collective effervescence,” which describes the gathering of a community or society to create a unifying experience through similar thoughts and actions.

> The very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation. Every emotion expressed resonates without interference in consciousnesses that

> are wide open to external impressions, each one echoing the others. The initial impulse is thereby amplified each time it is echoed, like an avalanche that grows as it goes along. (Durkheim 217-218)

According to Durkheim, the characteristics of collective effervescence are through its communal and collective properties. Communal in its ability to heighten the emotional bonds and form more dynamic relationships between community members. While some have criticized the theory for appearing too broad and applying to any social phenomenon, Durkheim's objective was to suggest it was an intentional gathering for the specific purpose of evoking such an experience among those who attended. Tim Olaveson summarizes collective effervescence as classified through "intimacy, intensity, and immediacy, yet it involves will and intention, and symbolic focus. It is not simply mob psychology or camaraderie" (101). Another distinguishable trait of collective effervescence is its creative nature, typically heightened during times of social upheaval.

> Under the influence of some great collective shock in certain historical periods, social interactions become much more frequent and active. Individuals seek one another out and come together more. The result is the general effervescence that is characteristic of revolutionary or creative epochs. The result of that heightened activity is a general stimulation of individual energies. People live differently and more intensely than in normal times. The changes are not simply of nuance and degree; man himself becomes something other than what he was. (Durkheim 212-213)

From this, Durkheim typified differing instances of effervescence: creative and re-creative. New ideas manifest during creative effervescence, which could ultimately affect

the current social structures, even dismantling them. Re-creative effervescence describes the reaffirmation of religious and moral values on which society is built. Wasteland Weekend is not a religious ritual nor is the experience itself a collective effervescence in its entirety; it emulates the principal qualities of a collective effervescence because it is an intentional gathering of like-minded people to create a shared, communal experience that reinforces existing relationships while simultaneously producing new ideas in an (alternative) time of social turmoil. Their behavior could be seemingly "outlandish," as they express themselves in a space where societal norms are not as restricting; they allow themselves the freedom to invent their own boundaries within an imagined world of complete chaos.

> It's such a weird, bizarre experience that throws you off your equilibrium, isolates you from society, and thrusts upon you all these new intrinsic ways to experience fame and social gratification. It forces you to experience and interact with a bunch of strangers that you would never talk to in other contexts. And it's so socially and culturally arresting and very unifying in the idea that there's literally 6,000 other people that are willing to boogie down on this very silly idea. Absolutely to the most hardcore extent, and they all come together one year, and it just happens [laughs] kind of thing. And there's beauty in that. And there's, obviously, unification in that. (Gogurt)

Victor Turner expands on folklorist Arnold van Gennep's rite of passage model that proposes a three-step progression consisting of pre-liminal (separation), liminal (transformation), post-liminal (reaggregation) stages. In the first phase, the group or individual is detached from their previous identities or social structure. The second phase,

liminal, represents the transitional phase, where participants are ambiguously in-between states. Lastly, the individual or group adorns a new sense of status and is reincorporated back into society. Turner further explores the process as having three main components: *sacra*, *communitas*, and *ludic recombination*. Sacra, meaning "sacred things" in Latin, pose as symbolic objects or actions, intending to represent the religious or cosmological origin, significant to the culture under scrutiny. Examples of the sacra can include religious relics, dramatic performances of myths, or a teacher passing theological knowledge to their student. Ludic recombination describes the playful reconfiguration of conventional patterns, however ludicrous or deviant, allowing what is typically a plausibility to become a brief reality; for example, the "grotesque" or "monstrous" recombination such as animal heads on human bodies is commonplace, characteristics also found in the carnivalesque (Turner 1967, 1969, 1982). Communitas occurs via the temporary abolition of social structures to create an egalitarian atmosphere among participants. According to Turner, communitas encourages bonding and camaraderie in a shared experience, challenging the obligatory relationships found in day-to-day society – it exists where "social structure does not" (Turner and Tuner 206). Turner's preoccupation with structure, separating the social from the structure, is seemingly antithetical to Durkheim's approach to communal congress. As Olaveson observes, "In fact for Turner social structure has a limiting or negative impact upon people. It causes them to be segmented into roles they must play, it ultimately limits individuals and society, it holds people apart, defines their differences, and constrains their actions, and it separates man from man, and man from absolute reality; it attempts to describe the continuous in discontinuous terms" (Olaveson 104). Turner later coined the term *liminoid*

(derived from Greek, meaning “form or shape”) to describe the events that have liminal components but are not a societal obligation. Examples of liminoid events are concerts, sports events, and even some festivals. Wasteland is arguably more a liminoid experience because while it does possess elements of liminal transformation in the individual, it is not a societal necessity, and involves more “play” (Turner, 1974). Much like the carnivalesque model, the post-apocalyptic setting of Wasteland Weekend allows the temporary eradication of socioeconomic hierarchy as well as communication with the outside world, creating a brief period of communitas among Wastelanders where social status is irrelevant, and people come as they are. Butler explains,

> We've been able to cultivate a very positive atmosphere out there that isn't as cliquey or kind of hierarchical. And it's very open. And we get people who suddenly, at whatever age they're at when they fought that kind of feeling they have as maybe a teenager, a college student, where there's all kinds of fun, new people coming into your life in and out all the time, they get to have that again. And I think that's what I see people value the most. So it's a catalyst for a way of dealing with the loneliness that is somewhat brought on by our technology; the way we text instead of call and talk on the phone – emails that are less personal than letters and, you know, less and less human interaction. And when you're out there in the desert, and you don't have-when your cell reception isn't that great and when it would kind of break theme to be on your cell phone the whole time anyway, you tend to kind of look up instead of look down and you embrace people around you both literally and figuratively. (Butler)

Turner further divides communitas into three types: existing or spontaneous, normative, and ideological. Spontaneous is a bit of a misnomer because much like collective effervescence, communitas is purposeful, rather than happenstance. “It is not just the ‘herd instinct,’ nor is it simply the ‘pleasurable and effortless comradeship that can arise between friends, co-workers, or professional colleagues any day.’ It is a transformative experience that goes to the heart of each person's being and finds in it something profoundly communal and shared” (Olaveson 105). What Turner implies by spontaneous is when the individual experiences a specifically “counter-cultural” event, which typically occurs outside social norms. Normative communitas refers to the period within communitas that transitions from the suspension of social norms into the need for them. Ideological communitas exemplifies the ideologies found in utopias.

Wastelanders experience communitas throughout the festival, given its professed “counter-cultural” setting, a considerable example of spontaneous communitas. Arguably, the efforts to create a non-hierarchical locale for Wastelanders do occur outside social norms, and while the Wasteland Weekend organization establishes and enforces rules, they ultimately serve to ensure the safety of festival-goers as well as thematic parameters so as not to break the suspension of disbelief. This also ties into Butler’s previous comment about banning the (outward) use of modern-day technology within the festival grounds. In doing so, Wasteland becomes relatively impenetrable – within reason – to external influence, allowing Wastelanders to have that collective experience. “I used the word earlier: ‘orchestrated serendipity,’” says Firebird. “That's what Wasteland is, it's like we're going to come together and we're going to create

serendipity for each other. I'm going to make it so that you can stumble upon something magical at Wasteland. That's what it's about."

Community-Building Activities

Bartering remains one of the more popular activities at Wasteland, either for entertainment or necessity. Although, some see it as a personal challenge to see if they can walk away with the best barter, "I've seen one guy go from a pack of cigs to – he left the event with an ATV," Wastelander "Lady Cassandra the War Priestess" remembers. "He bartered 50 different times, but he started with a pack of cigs and then he ended the event, literally having to figure out how to get a trailer so he could take [an] ATV back to his house. Who does that?! What sort of event does that? Wasteland. Wasteland does that" (Lady Cassandra). Some use it to create fun missions for Wastelanders by challenging them to locate a particular item and barter for it or find a barter item that is of equal or greater value to win a specific prize. Most use it as a means of bribery, like alcohol, while some barter because they forgot to bring ice. Depending on the rarity or demand of the item, Wastelanders will try to find the best deal for their trade. Barter and fair-trade allow Wastelanders to rely on one another, practicing the values of a shared communal currency system. Sometimes it is less about reliance and more about the appreciation of other Wastelander's creations. Wastelander Shines made jewelry to barter one year and traded a pair of earrings for a pair of chicken skulls – a decision she later regretted. Although, two years later, she came across the same vendor wearing the earrings, "I was so taken aback and I was like, 'Oh my God, those are mine.' And she's like, 'Really? These are my favorite thing in the whole world. I wear them all the time.'

And so, I made the change for me of, 'Okay, never mind. That was the best barter ever because they went to someone who loves them,' which is amazing" (Shines).

In addition to barter, Wastelanders find it easier to assimilate to the community through events and activities. One such popular event is "Bounty Hunting." Initially created by the tribe, the "Rust Devils," Bounty Hunting gives Wastelanders the opportunity to explore the grounds and meet people. Wastelanders, who participate, agree to be both the bounty and the bounty hunter and have their pictures taken and turned into wanted posters. The bounty hunter's goal is to find their bounty and challenge them – most will engage in simple games such as rock, paper, scissors. Both bounty and hunter receive plastic fingers, signifying their trigger fingers. Whoever loses the challenge surrenders their "finger" as proof of the victor's success. They can either bring their bounties "dead or alive." If the loser agrees to come back "alive," the winner will escort them back to the Rust Devils' camp and claim a higher reward. If the loser prefers to be "dead," then the hunter or bounty returns just the finger and their wanted poster to the Rust Devils and will still receive their original bounty reward. A regular "wanted" bounty requires the hunter to play a simple game; the "most wanted" bounties require more from the hunter, such as mini-games or missions to capture their bounty; should they win, they receive a prize from the bounty as well as a higher reward. Several tribes adopted this game into their own missions and quests for Wastelanders, but Bounty Hunting is an essential tool to the Wastelander looking to make friends and see what Wasteland has to offer. Sometimes humorous encounters ensue, like Jameson's experience, wherein his pursuit of finding his bounty, he befriended their camp/tribemates, who helped him turn her in.

Wastelander "Firebird," a professional software engineer, created a meet-up mission outside the festival online called "You Are Awaited," another nod to the War Boys' of *Fury Road* ("I am awaited in Valhalla!"). Inspired by an interaction he had with another Wastelander in which they had planned to meet to barter Canadian candy but had difficulty finding each other, he thought of a way to turn it into a mission. Because there is rarely cell phone service and organizers discourage using modern-day technology (outside an emergency), they had to communicate through the bulletin board in the center of town and eventually found one another. The mission is similar to Bounty Hunting, but both participants agree to find each other, unlike Bounty Hunting, where bounties actively try to avoid their hunters. "I think more women are interested in my mission because you can choose who's going to find you. If you're just going to put a picture of yourself up somewhere and then let random people hunt you down, it might be a little sketchy for some people" (Firebird). He designed the mission interface to mimic dating apps like Tinder, where a Wastelander agrees to meet up with another Wastelander at Wasteland or Wasteland-sponsored events. Participants upload a profile of their Wastelander-selves, decide from a pool whom they would like to meet, and the algorithm generates a singular match. If there are too few or an odd number of people, the chances are unlikely that they will match with someone. A week before the event, Firebird contacts participants to let them know whether or not they have a match. He initially tested the prototype on other post-apocalyptic events, and by the time Wasteland happened, eight hundred people signed up to participate. The mission was so successful that Firebird became an administrator for the Wasteland Singles group. "Some people

still have the idea that for singles, but it's for everybody. You can just meet a friend" (Firebird).

Apart from organized activities, some Wastelanders share a bond over ridiculous antics that occur over the course of the festival. One such anecdote surrounded an empty helicopter chassis that the "The Dead Crows" tribe brought to Wasteland as a decorative piece for their camp – they replaced the blades with a ceiling fan and adorned the body with graffiti; Wastelanders dubbed it the "HeckleCAWpter." Wastelander Beef encountered the HeckleCAWpter in the early morning hours when a group of inebriated Wastelanders decided to steal it from the Dead Crows and leave it at another tribe's camp as a prank. Despite being empty, the chassis was still relatively heavy, and it was pitch black, so Beef and his friend offered to help. "I don't know who any of these people are. I was just like, 'Oh, yeah, you're stealing a helicopter? Yeah, I'm going to help you steal a helicopter,' because of course I am" (Beef). After celebrating their successful trek across the grounds in the dark, they quickly scattered upon hearing a security guard approaching. "The next morning, these guys woke up and were like, 'Where the hell's my helicopter?'" He laughs. "And then, you know, the other guys were like, 'There's a helicopter in our yard now' [laughs]." From there, it became an event-wide joke to steal the HeckleCAWpter.

> If you go and look at pictures from 2019, there is pictures of this helicopter everywhere: people are putting it on their car and driving around, there's people in their underwear marching it up and down Main Street with the thing perched up on their shoulder, there's people riding in it…it just went from place to place to place to place, over the whole course of the weekend. (Beef)

The legacy of the HeckleCAWpter bringing Wastelanders together continued, even after the conclusion of the 2019 event. A year later, on a video call with other Wastelanders, Beef recalled the story of the HeckleCAWpter only to discover that two members on the call were a part of the original group who he helped move it, “I was like, ‘I hugged you in the middle of the night in the pitch darkness and I had no idea who you were. And now we're meeting on a video call a year later!’” He laughs, “Like, what are the odds that out of four thousand-ish people, that I'm just going to run into two of the other people that I stole the helicopter with?”

Outside Events & Tribe Gatherings

Wastelanders often comment on the closeness of the community in that they build dynamic relationships that exceed the confines of the festival, so much so that they are constantly in contact with other Wastelanders. “We used to hang out pretty regularly, almost sometimes there'd be periods where we'd see each other every week, sometimes at least every month, like we had for a while we had this Wastelanders dinner meet-up where we would pick out a different restaurant. We'd all talk about what we're doing and what we're going to plan for next year” (Gateway). Wasteland Weekend may be a festival that happens once a year, but Wastelanders seek to maintain those relationships by attending other post-apocalyptic events or hosting their own events throughout the year.

Some use the time in between to work on their gear, so they will host “build days” for Wastelanders to gather, either as a tribe or individually, to assist each other with camp or costume construction. “I used to host about once-a-month build-parties that we would do. It didn’t matter what tribe you were, just if you were in the East Coast and you

wanted to work on stuff, come on over, and we'd work on stuff" (Lady Cassandra). Other groups will arrange formal events, like the NorCal Wastelander's annual Christmas-New Year's party called "NucYule." Needle, who hosts the gathering, elaborates,

> I hosted this event in late January and it's pretty much the concept based on Vikings and having a feast and celebrating the weather and what happened if you didn't know what Christmas was or Yuletide was and it kind of pulls in those elements and makes it post-apocalyptic theme and that's where "NucYule" came from was "Nukuole" and "Yule" put together, as one word. (Needle)

They do an ornament gift exchange, where Wastelanders hang ornaments on a Christmas tree made from rebar and chainmail. After the event, most keep the ornaments and incorporate them into their costumes for the next year at Wasteland. The last year they held the event was in 2020, where she hosted a sit-down dinner party for over 120 people. "And that's what I love to do for everybody, is host events, bring us together, and do stuff constantly off-season for everybody" (Needle). The NorCal Wastelanders also host an unofficial Wasteland Ball for those that cannot make the event in LA.

Not all Wastelanders can see one another regularly since Wastelanders come from near and far to attend the festival. But some like to attend other, smaller post-apocalyptic festivals throughout the year. The more popular festivals in the US (after Wasteland Weekend) are "Detonation," which happens in Uranium Springs, AZ; "NukeAtlanta" in Atlanta, GA; "Apocalypse East" in Montrose, PA; and "Aftermath" in Gadsden, AL. Wasteland has inspired the creations of other festivals, both nationally and internationally. There are post-apocalyptic festivals all over the world: "Junktown" in the Czech Republic, "Road to Ruin: Apocalypticus" in England, "Old Town" in Poland, and

"The Pit" in Ukraine. Wastelander "Ziptie" currently resides in New York, significantly further away from most Wastelanders. After his first Wasteland, he decided to research other festivals and attended NukeAtlanta the following year. Once he heard about Apocalypse East, which was a relatively new festival at the time, he reached out to the organizers to offer any help, "I actually, obsessively and persistently reached out to the owner and the event coordinator because it was a new event and offered everything and anything I could do to help to make this event awesome because I had such a good time at Wasteland '18. I wanted anyone else who might have felt the same way I did." Ziptie wanted the festival to emulate the culture at Wasteland Weekend for those who neither travel nor can afford to go out west.

Of course, many Wastelanders participate in other non-apocalyptic festivals. The most obvious comparison is to the more popular desert festival, Burning Man. Since 1991, Burning Man, an annual music and arts festival located in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, has had close to 80,000 attendees (as of 2019). The area turns into mile-wide, "Black Rock City," occupied by artists, organizers, medical services, peace-keeping "rangers" in designated areas or "theme camps" and "villages" (Gilmore 155). In the center lies the eponymous Burning Man – an effigy made of wood that stands roughly forty feet high – where its burning marks the festival's climax. Attendees, or "Burners," notably attend for the esoteric and transformative feeling often experienced upon attending the festival, so much so that they continue to attend annually. From a macro-level perspective, both Burning Man and Wasteland are comparatively similar in their execution. Both are desert-based and boast a heterogeneous and transformative collective effervescence among attendees; they champion creativity and self-expression within a

thematic scope emblematic of their subculture. They encourage the dismantling of traditional consumerism and create self-sustained amenities such as the barter system, newspapers, and amateur radio stations as well as the Thunderdome.

Scholar Lee Gilmore observes, “Despite this refusal of prescribed meaning, there is nevertheless a cultural ethos and distinct ideology connected with the event that encompasses principals of personal, social, and environmental responsibility” (160). What was most compelling in Gilmore’s observations was the sense of community brought about by Burning Man and the transformative element that continued after the event: “In some ways, individuals who discover powerful new communities through Burning Man may never completely reassimilate back into mainstream society after the festival is over. Instead, they seek to aggregate their new experiences which they find to be more satisfying, connected, and holistic, as well as more inter- and intrapersonal healing–with their old realities. They do this by taking the new identities and communities discovered at Burning Man back into the dominant culture with them, and attempting to pass these values through to other parts of our culture” (171). A long-time Burner and eventual senior staff member of the event, Nomad extrapolates on the comparison between Wasteland and Burning Man:

> Wasteland and Burning Man are similar in that they create the space and basic infrastructure and participants come and fill in. It's sort of like a sheet of music. They provide the sheet of music and the bars and then the people come in and write the melody. And it's different and everyone adds to the chorus of what it is at that moment, for that day, for that year, and people understand they do not come in with the expectation of being entertained like at Disneyland, but they

> come in with the joy of sharing a piece of who they are with each other in a fun, supportive, positive environment, and it allows people to express a part of themselves that perhaps they have not been able to express before or outside of that event, which is very important. (Nomad)

Many Wastelanders consider themselves Burners, although another comparative festival, similar in its role-playing feature with which Wastelanders participate, is the Renaissance Faire. Renaissance Faires invite participants to a similar immersive environment; however, the environment portrays a theatrical performance. Jennifer Sue Gunnels, in her dissertation, *Let the Car Burn, We're Going to the Faire: History, Performance, Community and Identity within the Renaissance Festival*, says,

> The Renaissance festival is ultimately most known for the interactive and immersive nature of the performance which relies upon various interactive techniques, such as improvisation and audience responses…The open exchange within this performance technique aids in constructing the communities and identities within the performance both operations tie it closely to the interactive theatre genre. (Gunnels 6)

There is a modicum of revisionism in its pursuit to create interactive history as most Ren Faires do not address the darker parts of the Renaissance. They choose to gloss over the plague, politics, and poverty of the Renaissance Age to uplift art, culture, and scientific advancements. "These advances easily come to the fore to obscure any other more complicated or ugly aspects of a particular past, allowing the community to identify itself, rightly or not, with an enlightened period of history" (Gunnels 11). Both Ren Faires and Wasteland exist on a liminal plane where spectators transport to an alternate

realm. Although such separation evokes the liminal space, there is still a slight link to reality in that Ren Faire consists of performers and an audience, while at Wasteland, everyone must participate in the story. Barter Jinx, a former re-enactor for Ren Faires, explains the difference, “with Ren Faire, you're under an actual working situation, you know, you're supposed to be doing something. Whereas at Wasteland you're there for fun.” She still enjoys reenacting, but the freedom lies in how she can develop those characters at Wasteland, “I don't have to follow certain rules in terms of how my accent or how my character – it's looser and I can develop more of what I want and how I want to be, how I want to portray my character as Barter Jinx, so that was a huge reason for me.” Needle expresses her struggles with Ren Faire, “The problem with Ren Faires and period-correct costuming is you're always being judged. You're always being judged by how period-correct it is. Or is it the right color? Is it the right style? Is the right period?” While Wasteland adheres to a theme and encourages people to participate fully, the community is not as critical.

> It's one hundred percent all-around immersive and everybody can be a little judgy. You'll see that on Wastelander Central [Facebook page] in the past. People do kind of attack other people about not being a hundred percent theme or more dirt. I always say, ‘more blood,’ but when you get out there, it's not that quite as judgy as what you'll see online. (Needle)

Wasteland Online

Wastelanders take to the online community to solicit advice from other Wastelanders about their barter items, costumes, builds, and other post-apocalyptic-

related content during the period between festivals. While Wasteland the event hosts between 4,000 to 5,000 people, "Wastelander Central," the official Facebook group, contains nearly 20,000 members. While the Wasteland Weekend organization has several online platforms, most will visit their homesite and subsequent Facebook groups, like Wastelander Central or "Wasteland Basic Training" for newcomers, to gain insight into festival details and connect to other Wastelanders; posts include how-to-guides on distressing techniques, feedback on costumes, questions regarding camping equipment and essentials, and pictures of post-apocalyptic thematically appropriate media as inspiration. Content varies from satirical to comedic and helpful, where members provide events, links, images, and tips to help the original poster. Wastelander humor presents itself through jokes, memes, and commentary in the online capacity, as evidenced by the aforementioned helpful posts—patterns of *Mad Max*-themed humor, as well as Wastelanders' excitement, litter the feed.

Norwegian cultural historian Ida Tolgensbakk's exploration into digital humor among a Swedish Facebook group revealed themes of parody: "Humorous performances are often very important to group solidarity and identity and, at the same time, are key in determining the identity of the joker and his responsive audience within the group" (Tolgensbakk 120). Dark humor is arguably an identifying factor among Wastelanders, exhibited in their responses, posts, and commitment to the theme. An example would be a post showing a meme of Wastelanders reenacting a scene from *Mad Max: Fury Road* while at Wasteland when the "War Boys" tie "Max" to the front of a Wasteland-themed car. White lettering over the image reads: "That awkward moment when you make the mistake of calling shotgun at Wasteland Weekend." Parody is one of the many

mechanisms in which Wastelander humor exhibits itself. Tolgensbakk notes, “Parody is dependent on in-group communication and genre knowledge to work” (120) — the frequency of humorous content and thematic posts bonds the online Wasteland community. Many stress, however, that as active as the online community is, “online Wasteland is not Wasteland.” Of course, Wasteland in the online capacity is not the same as going to the actual event, but some use it as an excuse to protect the sanctity of the event. Administrators are continuing to promote the welcoming community Wasteland boasts so frequently, and the online community has proved beneficial to keep Wastelanders informed, connected, and stoke the flames of their excitement in anticipation of the next Wasteland Weekend.

COVID-19

Throughout my observations and monitoring online content, I noticed a shift in subject-based humor that reflected the ongoing concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Typical instances of COVID-influenced memes, internet challenges, and basic dystopian-themed comedy infiltrate the groups' feeds, emphasizing the already dark humor entrenched within the culture. One question arose during my ethnographic research: how does a community, or subculture, that prides itself on the parodic and playful representation of the end of the world cope with an actual global-wide pandemic? How do Wastelanders continue to emulate their feelings of community despite mass-cultural alienation and separation? Despite its efforts to create an immersive experience, Wasteland does not prepare people for an actual apocalypse, and it is obviously not impenetrable to the outside world. Observing the versatility and resilience of an already

thriving online community in the wake of a pandemic altered the original narrative from: "We survived the end of the world, let's party!" to: "Well, we weren't ready for this particular scenario, but we will adjust, accordingly." Formerly perfunctory costume pieces have become more commonplace with the current restrictions on public spaces but with a dieselpunk aesthetic. For example, there are images of Wastelanders donning their industrial-looking facemasks doing quotidian tasks like grocery shopping, including toilet paper rolls to their costumes, and "expectation-versus-reality" posts comparing how they anticipated the apocalypse to the current situation. From an etic perspective, what we can understand about the Wastelander community amidst the COVID-19 pandemic is that, like true savants of dystopian content, they continuously prepare for the worst-case scenario.

Unfortunately, humor can only mask their true feelings for so long. Gogurt elaborates:

> Already, the big appeal of Wasteland is it kind of helps you combat the isolation that kind of creeps into just mundane life and whatnot and helps you get back to that real deal, tribalistic family roots that is kind of hard-woven into all of our programming. 2020 would have been the year for that to mean more than it ever meant. But obviously, the pandemic that necessitated it also made it impossible. (Gogurt)

Despite having to postpone their yearly gathering in 2020, Wastelanders continue to emulate their feelings of community despite mass-cultural alienation and separation through Zoom calls and socially-distanced camp-outs or gatherings. In lieu of the event, organizers created live online events on YouTube and Facebook that featured band

performances, videos from past events, guest speakers, and the like. Wastelanders watched while wearing their Wasteland gear and posted pictures to show solidarity. Tribes held their own events like the "Cult of Catmeat," which hosted weekly Facebook Live "Cards Against Wastelanders," similar to "Cards Against Humanity," – an adult card game where players complete fill-in-the-blank sentences with typically offensive or suggestive phrases – but with Wasteland-specific content. While they understood the reasons behind canceling the event, Wastelanders could not help but feel discouraged; sentiments of: "it sucks," or "it's been hard," echoed throughout my interviews with Wastelanders; Gateway just took a long swig of his beer when asked how he was coping. Some fared better than others, but a majority of Wastelanders felt the negative impact of a Wasteland-less year, "It really killed me this summer not to [go] because creating for other people and hosting events inspires me to create for myself. . . not having that inspiration really killed me this summer," says Needle. "I've never known what it was like to actually come home, eat and sit in front of a TV like a normal person. I've never done that. I've always had crafts. I've always had sewing to do. I always was making something." Evil Bink expresses his equal disappointment, "It's my Christmas, it's my New Year's, it's my birthday all rolled up into one. I would rather do that than just about anything else. So, when the plug got pulled, I appreciated the necessity of it. I understand why they did it. I agree with their choice, but it didn't make it any easier."

Some took the time to focus on the 2021 event, setting up planning calls with their tribes or working on costumes to combat the feeling of isolation, "I'm making a chainmail skirt right now…some moms will sit and they'll knit something, I just happened to be weaving metal," laughs Fatal.

> I was like, 'Well, if I do a little bit each day, maybe I'll come up with a really cool chainmail skirt at the end of this.' Some days I'm really motivated, other days I'm a little sad or just busy because I don't know. But I started feeling a little more artistic inspiration a couple months ago after not really having much just sort of coping with just the madness of everything, but getting back into doing pieces for a costume brightened me up a little bit. (Fatal the Swordmaster)

The Wasteland community understandably questions the festival's future, with health and safety concerns at the forefront in light of the pandemic. "It is a dirty event," says Gateway, "because you have to bring everything yourself. So, if you want to go get food from somewhere, you've got to go wash your own damn hands, you've got to go get your own wet naps… People get packed in together. You've got booze being shared left-and-right." He also jokes about how Wastelanders get a taste for literal dirt, "There's a joke about how Wastelanders will keep dirt from Wasteland to sprinkle on their food for the rest of the year and it's not too far from the truth!" After the festival, it is relatively common for Wastelanders to get sick with Valley Fever or "Waste-Lung" from living in the desert conditions for almost a week, "About twenty percent of the entire people that go to Wasteland will come home and they will get sick of something. It just happens… It could be the flu or some sort of bug going around, or it will be Valley Fever, which is kind of a gross thing. But it's a normal thing. It's the fecal matter that's in the dirt of the desert getting into your lungs and that actually causes an infection" (Gateway). Some, like "Evil Bink," are not that concerned about the effects in the long run,

> Honestly, I don't think it really will change that much, in all honesty. From my own experience, the two big things we're talking pandemic-wise is social

> distancing and obviously, wearing masks. Well, half the people at Wasteland are already wearing masks, for goodness sakes… Are they approved by the medical staff? Probably not. But they're wearing a mask and it wouldn't be that hard to modify something to be safe. (Evil Bink)

Social-distancing, however, gives him pause, "We're all a really loveable group. I mean, there is more physical hugs from strangers and people you've never even met before. You're hugging everybody…I think that would change a little bit, but I don't think it would be something that people would want to change, I think people enjoy that aspect of it" (Evil Bink).

Since those interviews, there are now vaccine distributions with new safety precautions implemented, and at the time of this thesis (August 2021) the September 2021 event is still projected to take place. Organizers require proof of vaccines for Wastelanders to attend, which, as for the overall populace, caused predictable pushback. Still, Wastelanders look to future events with hope as society begins to heal and are anxious to return to their Wasteland family. The trials and tribulations incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic were an overall lesson in empathy, involving taking measures to not only help ourselves survive but our community, which is also an essential value among Wastelanders. According to "Lady Cassandra,"

> I look at Wasteland Weekend and all these *Mad Max* enthusiasts where they could have made a warlord thing because *Mad Max* has warlords. But no, instead, they made it all about working together and trying to survive it together. And that's beautiful, it's a beautiful thing to recognize and see that, like in the end,

> community lays out everything and that surviving together and not surviving as an individual is what matters most. (Lady Cassandra).

When asked what was the most surprising or rewarding thing to come from Wasteland, Jared Butler says:

> I think the most rewarding has been the community itself. I don't take credit for how great the community is, but I take pride in it. And knowing that I helped guide it along the way and helped kick it off, you know, certainly, there was some post-apocalyptic culture and some *Mad Max* fan culture before we came around. But we changed it, and we grew it. And I'd like to think we improved it a little and we made it our own. And we always wanted it to be something positive.

CHAPTER IV

"WE WHO WANDER THE WASTELAND IN SEARCH OF OUR BETTER SELVES": IDENTITY AND TRANSFORMATION

Identity

While Wasteland exhibits advantages of communal efforts in a survivalist setting, it is also important to explore the impact of both the event and the subculture on the individual level. How does the individual narrative fit into the larger subcultural narrative? Williams discusses the role of identity versus the self, “In short, the self is a reflexive process that enables our behaviors and actions. Identity, on the other hand, is that part of our selves that is expressed through our interactions and relationships with others” (100). There is an underlying shared ideology within a subculture, but there are multifaceted methods as to how the individual enacts these particular values. Despite the similarities in their stories about Wasteland, each Wastelander’s experience is unique. Wastelander identities express themselves through naming conventions, behaviors, tribal affiliations, and costumes and can persist beyond the confines of the festival. Of course, they all identify themselves as “Wastelanders,” but what does it mean to be a Wastelander? And how does Wasteland ultimately affect the Wastelander on a personal level?

For Wastelanders, Wasteland Weekend is not just a party in the desert; it allows them to enter the realm of “what if?” Again, this event is not meant to be a realistic simulation but a playground based on the narrative that society is dead, but we are not. At the end of the festival, organizers display a quote from the opening and closing title cards

in *Mad Max: Fury Road* on a board painted by Wasteland Weekend co-owner, Art Director and COO, Adam Chilson, sending a message to every Wastelander to take with them on their journey home. It reads: "Where must we go, we who wander this wasteland, in search of our better selves?" Co-creator Jared Butler expands on why they chose to use that quote: "The year the movie came out, we put that quote on a rusty piece of metal. It was painted up beautifully. And that is the last sign that people see as they leave our event. Sort of a reminder that maybe you found a better version of yourself out here and let's try to keep that going" (Butler). The feelings emitted from each Wasteland experience sustain its existence as a haven for those who just want to be themselves or rediscover themselves.

Ritual, Masking, & Folk Art

As with most festivals, Wasteland Weekend exhibits elements of transformation through either the event itself or its long-term effects. Either way, Wasteland's impact on the Wastelander goes beyond the event. An example is the subculture itself and the desire to maintain subcultural relationships during the period between events. Rituals like a rite of passage may be a piece in a larger puzzle emblematic of a community or culture, but the transformation incurred is still on the individual level. As Jack Santino observes, "While it is apparent that individual life transitions are in fact social events that ramify throughout networks of a community, the subject of rites of passage is the individual" (Santino 64). Of course, the literal transformation occurs when Wastelanders first attend the festival, briefly shedding the constraints of society and donning costumes and becoming their Wastelander selves. One of the well-known traditions is when a

Wastelander receives their name. Wastelander names, much like the Playa names at Burning Man, are a part of Wasteland initiation rituals where Wastelanders adopt a pseudonym before or during the festival. Some have control over their own names and bring them to Wasteland; others receive their names from other Wastelanders through their noticeable behavior or appearances. Wastelanders are free to embrace or reject them, but most use them to guide their experience through character and costume development.

Folklorist Elizabeth Tonkin explores the ideas of masking within festival, ritual, and cultural performance. The use of masks indicates a deeper meaning behind their aesthetics. Until we understand their specialized cultural meanings, they are not just a piece of a costume but also a way to "communicate meanings through transforming the wearer" (225). Masks can key the existence of a supernatural or non-natural world. Our faces mostly communicate our identities, so donning a mask is a method to transform one's identity. As Tonkin observes, "At the most, this real transformation of appearance is identified with a transformation of essence" (226). Containing transformative properties allows masks to exist on the threshold of possibilities. They are essentially a crossover from life and death, between identities and social states, human and non-human; they are liminal. Tonkin offers a contextual example with the mask used in more secular performances outside ritual. She draws on Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory, where masks are symbolically the act of societal inversion. Where masks can perpetuate ludic recombination as suggested by Turner, masks can illustrate the grotesque body with their prominent features to mock societal imperfections, "If masks are understood as a means of communication, we can see their suitability for what they are commonly supposed to

do: support belief in ancestral spirits, effect social transitions, heal the sick, legitimize power or criticize it" (231). Mask-wearing is not crucial to Wastelander's costumes, but it is prominent. While they allow the wearers to maintain Wasteland's theme, masks also possess a functional component by protecting the wearer from the harsh desert winds. Additionally, the symbolic representation of masks elicited by Tonkin could potentially apply to Wasteland's costumes overall. With their costume comes freedom of creative expression, but mostly, as Tonkin suggests, it serves as a transformation of identity. By wearing their costumes, attendees become official Wastelanders. They become true bricoleurs – creating new meaning through existing and limited means – as they engage in the defining process of repurposing and recycling materials; this is part and parcel of the Wastelander aesthetic as well as that typical of the aesthetic and ideals of anti-establishmentarianism, do-it-yourself ethic of the punk subculture.

Wastelanders' costumes or names may not be literal representations of themselves but they demonstrate the theory that folklorist Michael O. Jones articulates about processes and motivations behind the creation of traditional objects. According to Jones, social interactivity can be a motivator for folk artists or a result of their work; folk art is a way in which the individual can contribute their story to a community. "The feeling of connectedness that seems to motivate many to create art extends not just to a past era but to family and community" (Jones 261). Because artists tend to communicate a part of themselves, the creation process can be one of self-clarity, especially in scenarios that confront the artists' sense of self. As Jones notes, "Some people turn to folk art to clarify their identity, particularly when events challenge their self concept" (266). Not every Wastelander uses their art to reclaim their identity; they often use it to orchestrate the

experience they want to have at Wasteland. Whether they are role-playing or are a dystopian version of themselves, Wastelanders cobble together unlikely materials that appear disheveled and worn-out, mostly to fit in with the theme at Wasteland but also to tell their stories of survival and resilience. As Nomad says, “If you are spending a lot of time with something, it's like your energy, you're putting your energy into it, you're bonding to it. And it makes it all the more a part of you. And so, I think that happens with whatever you're doing.”

Bricolage & Identity

Klaasjan Visscher, Stefan Heusinkveld, and Joe O’Mahoney conducted a study surrounding bricolage and identity work within management consultants to determine how to construct bricoleur identities and whether their organizational environment enables them or constricts said identities, and how they rise above their usual lower social status (356). They define identity work as what one says and does in pursuit of an identity. After interviewing over 130 consultants, they concluded that while the bricoleurs are victims of their circumstances, creating meaning with limited resources has no bearing on their identities. They shape identities through methods rather than materials, “Thus, rather than considering their approach as an adaptation to the situation, they discursively frame the situation to fit their approach” (368). In reality, Wastelanders do not have limited resources, but their dedication to immersion ushers in the idea of an alternative world with material limitations in order to build a network of new meanings and symbols. It is not the message of resourcefulness through their creations, but because

they find freedom in those restrictions, they can shape their identities within the fabric of Wasteland's story.

"Lady Cassandra the War Priestess" originally came to Wasteland with the intent to bring a previous name, "Envy," but noticed the plethora of people named "Envy" at Wasteland. As a result, she tried her hand at getting a Wasteland name:

> I didn't really have a character, yet. I didn't really have me, yet. I hadn't gone yet, so I didn't really know who I wanted to be. And I also realized that because I didn't know who I wanted to be at the Wastes and what the Wastes was going to do to me. It was less about who I wanted to be and what the Wastes really change you into. (Lady Cassandra)

After she went almost the entire weekend without a Wasteland name, a fellow Wastelander asked her real name, and she told them the story of her namesake, Cassandra. According to Greek mythology, Cassandra was a prophetess of Troy; her beauty drew the attention of a god, Apollo, but she rejected his advances. The vengeful god then cursed her gift of foresight so nobody would believe her prophecies, which some believe led to the fall of Troy. After sharing this story, her Wasteland name became "Lady Cassandra the War Priestess" as a testament to the myth and herself. In addition to her "War Priestess" title, she has earned many honorifics as an honorary member of multiple tribes. "So, I am the weird wanderer who doesn't keep with one tribe. I prefer it that way because I just have fun with everyone and anyone and that's just who I am… I've always been a part of many groups." From there, she took the idea of being a war priestess and incorporated it into her costumes. Each year, she constructs a new color-coordinated costume and incorporates naturally-sourced materials, like bones and furs.

"All my other stuff for Wasteland, all my outfits, have to be coyote," she says. "So, I have bones all over that are coyote: I wear a coyote earring, I have a coyote necklaces; they are on the actual outfits themselves." Coyote contains cultural significance for Lady Cassandra, who is of Cherokee descent.

> I don't wear any other furs like, there's no rabbit, there's no fox; it's just coyote…the Wasteland one that I wear around my body like this, where the mouth and the tail are basically eating each other, that one is the same skull and the same fur; they're actually of the same [coyote]. So, I do try to keep it as, not just ethically-sourced, but I try to get as many parts from that animal as I can (Lady Cassandra).

"Gogurt" received his name from his Wastelander friend "Donut." Noticing a trend, a third friend became "Sweet Justice." "There was nothing that could transcend the importance of how we would be immortalized in this world. And somehow, we ended up with 'Gogurt,' 'Donut,' and 'Sweet Justice'" (Gogurt). Eventually, others with food-pun names joined, forming their tribe: "Operation: Dessert Storm." Initially, he was not a fan of his nickname but grew to accept it. From there, he built a character around the name. Inspired by video games like *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Death Stranding*, Gogurt LARPs as a courier, "I'm a guy who showed up at Wasteland and needed a job, and I took a parcel for delivery, and it turns out I was really good at it." Gogurt felt his interests were better suited for more helpful missions rather than confrontational, so instead of participating in activities like Bounty Hunting, he occasionally works for the Wasteland postal service. Gogurt's wife, "Aspardame" (a classy play-on of "Aspartame"), had an oppositional approach and became a Blood Apothecary. Even though they are seemingly juxtaposing

personalities, both still maintain their real-life dynamic, “if you had met us in real life, you would know that that's a very predictable dynamic, because she's just on a different social level than I am, for sure. But for us to take kind of our existing personas and bump them up even crazier into a Wasteland version and yet still maintain some of that semblance. It's cool.”

Some like Wastelander “Evil Bink” came to Wasteland with his name. He received it in high school, initially as a humorous antithesis to a character in one of his favorite books, *A Spell for Chameleon* by Piers Anthony, where the main character, “Bink,” is quite fortuitous in his endeavors. “It's this kind of magical ability that, no matter what happens, he can manage to get out of it” (Evil Bink). Apparently, Evil Bink often encounters extreme misfortune, hence, the oppositional name. The name proved true while on Evil Bink’s yearly pilgrimage with his tribe “The Lost Toys,” where they drive their Wasteland vehicles from Detroit to California, in costume; they had to stop in a small town because one of their trailers carrying their motorbikes was at risk of falling apart and needed a replacement bottom. Evil Bink noticed a nearby unmarked building undergoing renovations and had a stockpile of wood in their keep, so he decided to solicit their help. Upon entering the building, clad in biker clothes with pentagrams and braided hair, he soon realized it was a church. Fortunately, after he heard their predicament, the pastor kindly helped by retrieving the wood needed to fix the tribe’s trailer, and even church members assisted in their build. Evil Bink’s name does not necessarily shape his overall aesthetic, but his character’s origins tie to a motorcycle gang from *Fallout: New Vegas* called “The Great Khans,” from whom he gets separated and joins his current tribe “The Lost Toys.” “Most people would say that I am fairly dark. I'm an old Goth kid, you

know? So, I do tend to enjoy the villainous side of things rather than the heroes. You know, I cheer for the Joker, not the Batman," he reflects. However, his role-play at Wasteland reflects a more helpful-scavenger type: "I just have this tendency to be able to step out of myself and go do what needs to be done in the moment, and I think that's actually made me, as a person, a better person" (Evil Bink).

"Needle" used her tattoo, a small sewing needle on her shoulder, and her skills as a seamstress to define her name. A florist by profession, Needle taps into her sewing ingenuity to create meaningful costumes for herself and others in her tribe. "I change costumes every day, sometimes twice a day. I make headdresses. I'm way over the top…My costuming is very tribal. It's a lot of bleaching, a lot of distressing, I custom make a lot of things for myself because I am a full-figured, very curvy female. So, everything is custom-made. I wear a lot of skirts." Needle's dedication does not stop at her costumes; she is also responsible for the public relations of her tribe "The Burninators," inspired by the web cartoon "Homestarrunner." She also crafts bartering items like cockades, ribbon rosettes, with their tribe's logo bottle cap in the center to hand out to Wastelanders. For Needle, the experience is less about creating a persona but rather embracing who she is, "I think at Wasteland, I'm kind of the same person because I'm not a LARPer. I've never been good at speaking with an accent or being a character or an actor. So, I just kind of stick to who I am, naturally… Everybody's welcomed and that's kind of how I do things. I just always treat people fairly equal and welcome."

"Shines'" name derived from an email address but later enriched by her first Wasteland, where she brought and shared cherry Moonshine, earning her fame by using a bamboo hook to fish out cherries for other Wastelanders. Her name fits in with her

former tribe called the “Whiskey Runners” who smuggled “Whiskoline,” but after a few years parted ways, “I wanted something that was more like me. I wanted some dark, witch that holed herself up in a hovel while the world ended [laughs]. So, I definitely was able to get that aesthetic in the last two years that I went.” “Jameson” had a similar naming experience in that his name came about from his popular bartering item, Jameson Black Barrel whiskey. “Some groups are, ‘Hey, this is a private tribe.’ And I'm like, ‘Hey, I'm just walking around with a bottle of Jameson, decided to share. Didn't know if you guys want anything.’ They're like, ‘Oh, shoot! Come on in! Someone get this guy a beer!’ You know, and it's just different ways to meet people and make friends.” Being a part of the build-crew, Jameson gets away with wearing some of his beat-up clothing as a costume, “I go to the event to see the things, so I step into enough to get away with being looking Wasteland. Which raggedy clothes, black t-shirt that's tore-up but I don't go to the level of the tire armor and the vests and the weapons.” For him, it is less about the costume and more about the company he keeps while at Wasteland. He also participates in other events such as Ren Faire and military simulations, “I like the whole out-of-mind, out-of-body aspect where you can be something you're not. Try something different or amplify, intensify something you are but you can't be in regular public. You know, you can't walk around in torn clothes. I mean, you can, but people look down on you and stuff like that. It's just easier to have fun and experience and let go.”

Wastelander names can lead to role-playing as a post-apocalyptic alter-persona, but some claim their Wastelander personas are an exaggerated, unrestricted version of themselves. “I'm an inflated version of myself when I'm out there,” says Beef. “I'm me, but I'm just me more so: I'm louder, I'm more excited, I sleep and eat less, I drink more, I

run around and scream, and I get people to come into the tent and sing their hearts out. And I also make sure that everything is running correctly, you know, and bounce around. I'm really all over the place when I'm out there." This inflated sense of self becomes more pronounced in Beef's costume construction; different outfits cater to different personas, and some have names. One, in particular, "Lord of War," is a satirical costume at the expense of famous fascist leaders and dictators. "I'm the only asshole out there in a bright white tuxedo, that I have completely adorned in medals and a bunch of things that I didn't earn… It's ridiculous and when people see me walking around out there, it turns me into a different person," Beef explains. "I just wanted to be over-the-top. So, it's white, like, ducktail tuxedo with gold accents and a giant gold sash, and the shoulder pads are fake boobs, and there's just the most obnoxious buttons and pins all over it; it weighs probably sixty pounds, it's heavy and it's ridiculous. And there's no mistaking that it's me."

"Firebird" came to the festival with an idea he manifested for his novel, or "narrative," as he calls it, where the world ended in 1981, referencing the release of *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*. From there, he centers his style through the lens of his narrative to the apocalyptic alternative timeline at Wasteland. The narrative is a cross between truth and fiction, surrounding his own experiences at Wasteland and as both the main character and his alter-persona, "Firebird." Before Wasteland, he purchased a 1975 Pontiac Firebird and brought it to the festival. Admiring the artwork on the logo and assuming it was emblematic of the technology and style of 1981, he gave himself the name "Firebird." When creating "You Are Awaited," he solidified his name by telling Wastelanders their final task to complete the mission is to find "Firebird." As someone who does not think much of cosplay, Firebird considers Wasteland more an opportunity,

"I'm just wanting to become a different version of myself in a different reality, in an alternate timeline…[and] this enables me to do that. But then in doing that, I put on this outfit and I wear it sometimes out in the real world, too, because, I mean, why does it have to be an alternate timeline?"

While some build their costumes to reflect their names, the opposite is also true in that Wastelanders earn their names through their costumes. Wastelander "Fatal the Swordmaster" is a member of the elite guard at Wasteland, who stand watch and determine if Wastelanders are in appropriate attire. "We're the fashion police," she humorously clarifies. An avid cosplayer, Fatal brought a replica seven-foot-long sword from *Final Fantasy 7* to Wasteland. The sword earned her name "the Swordmaster" by the captain of the elite guard, "Captain Meyhem," but she added "Fatal" to appear more menacing. Inspired by similarly styled characters in *Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome*, Fatal emulates her own Wasteland looks and character backstory to a female guard within antagonist Aunty Entity's contingency. Fatal was a former seamstress of Bartertown who gained access to Aunty's inner circle and befriended the head of her guard, and also a saxophonist, Ton Ton Tattoo. Her friendship with Ton Ton led to her apprenticeship and eventual expertise in the study of the longsword, which made her the obvious candidate to replace Ton Ton after his injuries sustained from an assassination attempt on Aunty's life. In her real life, Fatal has traveled worldwide, aspects of which she integrates into her costume. "I had also lived in Japan for a while, so there was some Lamellar armor that I found some inspiration from some Japanese armor. And then I use the Japanese 6-in-1 chainmail." She also uses outside pop-culture references as inspiration: "I was inspired by Ragnar Lothbrok's armor from *Vikings*…one day I just sat down with some leather

strips and jump rings and put it together…So, if I see something cool that I think can fit into theme, again, with the Lamellar armor skirt, too, I'll just try to incorporate it" (Fatal the Swordmaster). Her traveling caused her to miss a few Wastelands, so she included her absence within her character's storyline as the worldly, wandering warrior returning home. "Then one of the owners of Wasteland…said once that he couldn't wait to see me walking back up with that giant sword over my shoulder. And so, I just sort of thought of, 'I wandered the world as this wandering warrior lady. And I've returned after several years,' which is exciting for me" (Fatal).

"Ziptie" also earned his name through his costume. Being a "black thumb" – a term found in *Mad Max: Fury Road* to describe mechanics but also to mean "gearhead" or "motorhead" –, he adorned his costume with electrical tape and zip ties on every zipper. Ziptie is a member of the "Dogs of War " tribe that creates replica vehicles from *Road Warrior* and stores them in California so they can bring them to Wasteland each year. Ziptie is less interested in character backstory, but he has several costumes, such as his "blackthumb scavenger" outfit or his "Smegma Crazy" outfit, to fit in with his tribe. His costumes do more to reflect practicality and functionality since he travels from New York to attend Wasteland, "I have a lot of Wasteland rat rod-style [motorcycles]. Most likely, none of them will make it to Wasteland, but I get to bring them to the festivals here on the East Coast. So, it's rough for me. It takes me a whole day to pack for the East Coast festivals – a pickup truck and a trailer, here, but when we go to Wasteland, it's carry-on and a check bag; either [it] fits or doesn't fit."

Wastelander "Doc" received his name due to the bright, orange jumpsuit he wore to his first Wasteland, which had "Underworld D.O.C," across the back. Doc's Wasteland

persona is like himself, who identifies as a people-pleaser, so he often volunteers with the check-in group, but he looks to Charlie Brown, stylistically. While the original character does not cater to the thematic guidelines with his notable bright yellow shirt, Doc took a lesser-known post-apocalyptic graphic novel *Weapon Brown*, based on Charlie Brown, to maintain the loner boy with his dog aesthetic to fit in with Wasteland narrative. While Doc's Wasteland name is not necessarily a reflection of his persona, he continues to build and shape his character. Often, though, his preparation tends to be last-minute due to his summer work schedule, "I would borrow my friends' beat-up old truck and drive down there. And it's like, 'Does this guy know he looks like he's going to the dumps?' Yeah, kind of [laughs]. So, it's like, 'Oh, you going to the dumps?' 'No, I'm going to Wasteland,'" he laughs, "Definitely go in expecting to be in character a lot, and you're not a bystander. You're an active participant in the story."

"Big Red" obtained their nickname through not only their fiery red hair but by incorporating a four-foot-tall, red prop bomb in their costume. They received the bomb from their father after their grandfather purchased it from a surplus store. "It's just like this really weird heirloom," they laugh. "I bring it last-minute; sort of just decide to put a guitar strap on it and I'm walking for less than five minutes before I hear somebody like, 'Did you see someone with that big red bomb? Oh my God!'" The bomb served as a jumping-off point into Big Red's backstory, as a "brainless barbarian-type" who came across a surplus of armaments – creating an element of uncertainty surrounding character stability. Big Red decided to make their character oppositional to their natural self, a very outgoing and talkative person. This is apparent in their approach to their costume, "My whole outfit is basically like a kilt and then like a pauldron shoulder armor with like a

buzz saw coming off of it and some goggles and stuff, basically…I have a tendency to go extravagantly, above and beyond as far as just aesthetic and then to actually try it and start paring it down," they said. "For instance, I had a highway sign that said, 'End Logging Operations.' And then I just cut out sections of it to kind of be armor cladding on my kilts area. So, it just said, 'End' and 'Rations.'" However, they found the desert climate and the restrictive implementation of the metal armor prohibited his comfort and mobility, so they reconstructed it to a more breathable costume piece.

Another way to earn a Wastelander name is through games and activities around Wasteland. Take "Spanky the Warmonger," for example. He received his name when he and a friend "Taxi" went to a bar, the first or second night of his first Wasteland. At this bar, they had a game called the "Wheel of Misfortune," where everyone had to spin the wheel when they entered. Of the choices, two revolved around spanking: "spank a stranger" or "be spanked by a stranger." He spun the wheel and landed on the latter. Several more people entering the bar spun "spank a stranger," and knowing he was a first-timer, they singled him out, but he obliged every time. After about the eleventh time – and a few drinks –, the person operating the wheel gave him a reprieve, saying, "'This guy has been a good sport and has had his ass spanked so many times I don't think he will sit right for the rest of the event, you are 'Spanky!'" And with that, I became 'Spanky'" (Spanky). Spanky added the "warmonger" because he is responsible for starting three "wars" at Wasteland, meaning he is in charge of running the "Wasteland Warfare" activity for the Northern Nomads.

> Basically, it is a war between factions, and people may join a side and gather "kill" tokens. The team with the most tokens by the end of the event is declared

> the winner. So far, we have had a civil war that became a 3-way battle with an invading Texas army that ultimately annexed California, another war to secede from Texas, and finally a kidnapping (of a Texan) that started a war involving pirates. (Spanky)

Some enjoy the activities so much so that they base their entire Wasteland experience around them. “Barter Jinx,” used to be a re-enactment performer at Renaissance Faires and modeled her character on her love for bartering and utilized her ability to improvise. For her first Wasteland, she fastened a cigarette girl box to display her bartering goods. After luring people to trade with her, she showed them a hidden layer of essentials such as toothpaste, Tylenol, sunscreen, and condoms. She developed her character based on her ability to improvise. Due to her success as a trader, she became a well-known personality at Wasteland, yelling at Wastelanders with a (fake) Russian accent, “‘Bits and baubles! Barker Jinx gives a good deal! Come buy from Barter Jinx! Special deals! Pretty shinies for pretty ladies!’” Barter Jinx is a co-leader of the Northern Nomad tribe that adopted a *Lawrence of Arabia* facade, combining British and Middle Eastern influence.

> It evolved to where I definitely had a lot more Middle Eastern influence and for practical purposes. Of course, some of my pieces I make, others were pieces that I either traded or I actually bought at a thrift store or another store and then I just kind of tear it up like, rusted it out or took paint stain to make it look like someone had a bloody handprint on my ass or something, you know [laughs]. (Barter Jinx)

While her costume evolved to allow more practicality while simultaneously adhering to her tribe's aesthetic, she also takes the time to develop her character, "I believe I draw off some of the personifications from my everyday life, but it's a lot more exaggerated, a lot more, in a very fun, silly way. So, yeah, but it took over two years to really fully develop that character."

Another Wastelander who developed their Wasteland persona around bartering is "The Barker," a crafter in his personal and professional life. He came to Wasteland with the intent to be a trader, basing his Wasteland aesthetic around a non-player merchant character in the *Resident Evil* series. Unfortunately, the name he brought was incredibly hard to maintain, but other Wastelanders noticed his propensity to "bark" at people in Bartertown, similar to a carnival barker, thus changing his name.

> And it wasn't that I was a carnival barker, I was *the* barker. I was the person who was shouting at everybody to come to Bartertown and hang out and it stuck. People realized that I was the guy to trade with. I would shout at you from one hundred feet away, you would have something noticeable, and I would be like, "You, over there, with the bright orange Mohawk," and that person would whip around. I'd be like, "Come here. We're trading." (The Barker)

Transformation

Pilgrimage

The evolution of Wasteland content with each iteration is more comprehensive than the previous years'. But perhaps, it is not just the event itself or the gradual content development where a Wastelander experiences significant growth. The journey to the

festival is representative of the transformational components within the rite of passage model but on a larger scale as a possible secular pilgrimage. Lee Gilmore describes pilgrimage as a "(1) ritualized journey to a (2) specific, culturally imbued geographic location intended to (3) connect individuals to a collective experience of (4) something beyond their ordinary existence, something perhaps sacred, transcendent, healing, or transformative, however the individuals and communities involved choose to conceive those ideas, and that (5) can emerge in either religious or secular contexts" (Gilmore 156). Wastelanders come from near and far. Some use that time to begin their Wasteland experience, like Evil Bink's road trip from Detroit or "The Great 40 Migration," where Wastelanders from the East Coast travel together along Interstate 40 and have designated meet-ups along the way to Wasteland. The dirt road off the main highway is roughly six miles long, making all who attend relatively isolated from civilization so they can enter a liminal realm and experience the aforementioned transformative properties. Even waiting in the check-in line is notoriously known for taking several hours, making it a pivotal part of the Wasteland experience as they separate from normative society. As soon as they enter the grounds, they become Wastelanders, stripped of their current societal statuses. Victor and Edith Turner applied their ritual theory to pilgrimage theory, specifically in Christian contexts. During this journey, after the individual separates from society, they enter the liminal state. In this particular case, Wastelanders leave the modern world and enter a post-apocalyptic alternative reality. During this period, they share the experience with other "pilgrims," and upon returning to society, they experience a sense of renewal. As Gilmore explains, "By performing a collective journey to a space between the worlds of the ordinary and the extraordinary, participants are frequently marked by

transformations that reach deeply and unexpectedly into their lives in an enduring fashion" (Gilmore 157). Though Gilmore is describing Burners, the same could apply to Wastelanders. "You don't know what you're going to expect at Wasteland," says Lady Cassandra.

> Everyone just expects the fun, which is there, the drinking, which is there, the cars, you expect the thematics, you expect everything that you see in video and photos, right? But what you don't expect is how much you get lost there and find yourself at the same time…but no matter where you are in life, Wasteland will tell you to lose yourself because it's there for you to find yourself. And it's beautiful. (Lady Cassandra)

The concepts behind pilgrimage bear a striking resemblance to psychologist Richard Gerrig's pursuits to describe a reader's transporting process when exploring narrative textual worlds. Marie Laure Ryan breaks down Gerrig's "folk theory" of immersion: the traveler transports through some form of transportation as a result of performing an action, then gets taken away from their world or place of origin, completely isolating the traveler, so there is little to no access to the place of origin, and the traveler then returns, changed by the journey (93-94). In this particular case, the "traveler," enters the liminal space, or the narrative world, and undergoes a transformation as a result of their pilgrimage. Journeys to Wasteland and Wasteland itself can be considered a pilgrimage into a post-apocalyptic narrative world, in which Wastelanders sustain a transformative experience and return to their point of origin or modern civilization. In reference to such ritualistic events, Jack Santino states that "Changes wrought by ritual are carried into the world and are incorporated into everyday

life as part of a new status quo. In a similar way, ritualesque events are attempts to affect the world beyond the space and place of their occurrence, long after the event itself is concluded" (Santino 68).

Folklorists Jack Santino, Susan Eleuterio, Rachelle Saltzman, Patricia Sawin, and Adam Zolkover, describe in their analysis of the 2017 Women's March, *Pussy Hats, Politics, and Public Protest*, the sanctioned freedoms that occur during festival times and the political discourse that can result from such events. Saltzman notes in her introduction to this edited volume, "There is a festival license to do and say risqué things, to articulate even dangerous and threatening ideas, during those times that sanction public play, parody, and social critique." She references Turner's concept of communitas and the potential of that experience to advance social change.

> The moments of exhilarated oneness, of *communitas* among those carried along by the energy of the crowd, also transmit great potential for social change that can spill over into the everyday. Part of the energy of the carnivalesque comes from its ability to bring together seemingly unrelated issues and movements from across the sociopolitical spectrum. It is this union of disparate parts that creates the potential for real social transformation. (Saltzman xv).

While Wasteland Weekend does have ritualistic components, the ultimate goal of the festival is not to effectively change the world. Some Wastelanders may consider it a social commentary on current events, but organizers do not see it as an altruistic endeavor pushing a message of social change. Wasteland is ritualesque in that Wastelanders themselves undergo a personal change that does carry out beyond the festival; this change manifests in the Wastelander's monthly preparation towards future events and constant

connection with other Wastelanders. In experiencing these changes through pilgrimage, the journey to and from Wasteland ensures the Wastelander's connection not just to the event but outside the event and to their identity within the subculture.

Self-Actualization

To fully understand the scope of how life-altering Wasteland is, I prompted Wastelanders with the question: "How would you say Wasteland has affected your life?" Gateway describes the experience like lifting a "veil of depression," "If you could imagine wearing heavy chainmail on just your shoulders, like a whole chainmail shirt and just having someone just lift it off you…I physically felt myself standing up straight. It was amazing." For some Wastelanders, like Ziptie, their first Wasteland was an unexpected stress-reliever. "I went to Wasteland Weekend with like this knot in my stomach," he says. "The knot didn't come out of my stomach until I got to Wasteland Weekend and started seeing a lot of good people and people from every different walk of life and every different perception, so on and so forth. And that just kind of opened my eyes a little bit more to the world. And it just made me...made me happy again." Barter Jinx shared similar sentiments in that her world-view was more receptive: "I've met people, different people, different walks of life and it's really interesting getting to meet and talk with them and then just have fun and be friendly. So, I feel like it definitely opens you up more and you're a little more kinder, a little more accepting, a little more understanding." She also mentions that it gave her the space to be more uninhibited, "within reason, you know, I'm not going to go in and burn some random stranger's car. Although, last year they brought a car into Wasteland and everybody got to beat it to shit.

I didn't, I missed out…But yeah, it's definitely just: 'Hey, it's fine to have fun, open up and be crazy as long as you're in a fun and in a safe environment' and all that."

While some wax poetic about how Wasteland has changed their outlook on life, others felt it unlocked new skills and passions they never knew existed. As Shines puts it, "I think that it gave me courage and independence and just nurtured that wild spirit that I had been missing for so many years. It just, like I said, gives me chills just thinking about it. Everything about Wasteland is like... it moves you." Gogurt never considered himself to be a particularly artistic person, but Wasteland showed him how to be a craftsperson. "I could be crafty and create costumes and a persona in a way that is really able to survive the litmus test of these people who are really, really hardcore about it and since then I think I've been a lot able to create just a lot more recklessly just for the sake of it, kind of thing," he says. "In the liberated, true real-deal creative, put pen-to-paper, don't care what happens, kind of just 'word vomit' way that all artists talk about. That's it. That's the high you're really chasing. So, it's definitely increased my artistic confidence in the idea that, 'Oh, look, here's an aesthetic I contribute to that has value and people will recognize and reward that.'"

Other Wastelanders find that the experience resurfaces dormant parts of themselves, reviving their passions and channeling them towards one enterprise. For The Barker, he has a predisposition to tinker and craft, "I'm always building in my shop; those are my weekends. I'm either woodworking, I'm forging something, I'm pulling something apart and putting it back together and making something new out of it." At Wasteland, he reported that others saw the value in his bricologian artistry. "I would have never considered myself artistic. I still can't draw or paint worth a dang – don't ever ask me to

doodle anything, you're going to get the worst doodles of your life. But applying techniques to color and making things and stuff like that? I'm all over it. And people are going, 'Well, this is art,' and I'm going, 'That's a shelf.'" Interactions such as these boosted his confidence, so much so that he started his own business, making props and crafting custom-made wares, "it gave me the kick in the pants I needed to do something for myself to make my life better."

For others, like Lady Cassandra, Wasteland has allowed them to express what they consider to be their authentic selves:

> A space where you get to be you – completely and ferociously and passionately be yourself? You don't find that anywhere else; you don't. And so that does transform you, and I will say I am transformed into being just a better, more amazing me that I can be and that I honestly thought I couldn't be… It's just becoming fully you. And finding a lot of paths and finding yourself. That's the beauty of Wasteland [laughs] and finding out who you are. I am a feral, wild creature who just loves to freely love and freely be. (Lady Cassandra)

Wastelander Firebird postulates, "When you live in the apocalypse, you know that you don't get to take anything with you. All you have is this one chance. And so, you got to take your fucking chance." Wasteland inspired Firebird to continue writing and he soon uprooted his life and moved to Australia. With the success of his website, he plans to expand the mission outside of Wasteland. "It's not even my identity in any meaningful way, it's my life," he reflects. "It's not that Wasteland is my life, it's that Wasteland has bumped me and steered my life and affected my life. Or it's not even that, it's like it's encouraged me to become who I already wanted to become."

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: ETERNAL, SHINY, AND CHROME

What makes a Wastelander? Of course, there are many ways in which to codify the process of becoming a Wastelander, but most agree that you have to have attended the festival, and not just the outside events; this is especially true in the context of the online community: “online Wasteland is not Wasteland.” Many share Firebird’s definition of what it means to be a Wastelander: “I went to Wasteland, I became a ‘Wastelander,’ I was one. It's the rest of my life and it doesn't matter if I ever go to Wasteland ever again, I'm a Wastelander now, for the rest of my life.” Gateway, however, gives a more robust definition:

> You have to become fully immersed in it; you have to feel the shitty weather, the dirt. You have to appreciate the shitty camp food and shitty drinks; you have to scavenge, barter, scrape a living out of what you wouldn’t consider the norm. But most importantly, you have to surrender yourself to it all to the point that you can't just run away from it; you embrace it. That's why everyone says, ‘you won't know until you go.’ You can look at all the photos and video there is, but you don't feel it, you don't smell it, and the thing that really makes a Wastelander [is] going through all that and loving it. (Gateway)

It is seemingly impractical to truly capture the quintessence of Wasteland and Wastelanders’ unbridled enthusiasm. The long-term effects of Wasteland are unmistakable; the organizers may have led the charge, but it is the community that continues to breathe life into the festival and the subculture. The transformative

components of a festival such as Wasteland Weekend result in the fierce loyalty Wastelanders have towards the event and the subculture.

> It is the thing that either just happens or it doesn't. It's not a formula that anyone can get a hold of because everybody wants that formula. That's like any event promoter wants that formula where your following is so loyal that it spills out into everyday life, that it almost turns into a second lifestyle. And that's what Wasteland has. There's a magic about it and it's all community-driven. (Nomad)

Maybe the possibility of surviving a post-apocalypse is what initially draws people to this event, but perhaps when stripped of (most) modern-day conveniences, thrown into harsh elements, and recognizing the value in the junk left behind for sustainability, the event's ultimate purpose is to remind participants of what is truly important in life, and that despite what the fiction suggests, you are not alone. Cartoonist Andrew Greenstone sums up his experience in his piece for *The Nib*, "Welcome to Wasteland," "I guess that's the wisdom hidden in this whole weird festival. Nothing lasts forever, and society as we know it will someday fall. But maybe it'll all have been worth it if you can just find your tribe." Who knows why it takes a mock-apocalypse to bring people together, but what is clear is that in light of global pandemics, socio-economic and political upheaval, and the effects of climate change, Wastelanders are a true testament to human resilience. The festival and subculture will continue to gain traction with seemingly no plans to slow down. All who want to come can join; there is plenty of room on the war rig.

The first time that we saw all those headlights coming in after sunset in the desert and we realized that people were actually going to show up to this thing that we had created called 'Wasteland Weekend,' it felt like a scene at the end of *Field of Dreams*, 'if you build it, they will come.' And he has finally achieved his crazy dream of putting in a baseball diamond in a cornfield. And you see all the headlights coming out to the middle of nowhere. It was kind of like that feeling; that was great (Butler).

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