

“I Was Taken as a Child. Stolen”: Narrating Automobility, the Stolen Generations and Environmental Justice in *Mad Max: Fury Road*

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Abstract: *In George Miller’s post-apocalyptic film, Mad Max: Fury Road (2015), issues concerning automobility, Indigeneity and environmental justice are inextricably intertwined. The depiction of vehicles and mobilities needs to be understood in the cultural and historical context the film draws on, such as the history of the Stolen Generations. This article aims at addressing the representation of the Stolen Generations in Fury Road in order to add another layer to previous readings of the film. Although the representation of Indigeneity in the film is problematic in several respects, the implications of such a reading of the female protagonist Furiosa and the elderly women called Vuvalini as Indigenous are intriguing, particularly when taking into account that Immortan Joe and his War Boys stand for a white masculinity. So far, readings of Indigeneity in current scholarship on the film are limited to criticising shortcomings. I want to suggest that paying attention to Fury Road’s Indigenous coding allows for two significant (re)interpretations of the film: firstly, it is possible to read the upending of Immortan Joe’s regime as Indigenous and feminist resistance to colonial and patriarchal legacies; and secondly, Furiosa’s and the Vuvalini’s participation in automobility balances their stereotypical proximity to the land. Indeed, neither Furiosa nor the elderly women are victimised; instead, they oscillate between being the harbingers of hope and the perpetrators of violence.*

Keywords: car culture; ecofeminism; Australia; resistance; dystopia; Indigeneity

Introduction

George Miller’s post-apocalyptic film, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) (hereafter *Fury Road*), is the fourth instalment in the *Mad Max* cult franchise and has received substantial attention. It engages with Australian history through the generic mode of the post-apocalypse and conjures up impressive visuals of the continent as a “wasteland” (see Eckenhoff 2021). Set after the “world [has] collapsed” (Orr 2015, n.p.), it has been repeatedly described as a sensually overwhelming “two-hour long chase scene” (Gault 2015, n.p.). In this wasteland, automobility is a means to further explore a dead world. One critic draws out the film’s

ongoing investment in car culture, while also commenting on the explosive action that takes place “amid the car-nage” (Kermode 2015, n.p.). *Fury Road* diverges from earlier films in its portrayal of a female lead with a prosthetic arm – Furiosa (Charlize Theron). Many have noted that Max (Tom Hardy) “is really more sidekick than hero” (Scott 2015, n.p.) and *Fury Road* “winds up as a testament to female resilience” (Lane 2015, n.p.). Despite their subjection to patriarchy, the female characters, including Furiosa and the elderly Vuvalini, certainly dominate the plotline.

At first glance, *Fury Road* seemingly casts women, and particularly the elderly Keeper of the Seeds (Melissa Jaffer), as saviours and harbingers of hope. In this sense, the film plays with essentialist notions of gendered identities – a strategy which elicits readings perpetuating precisely such essentialisms. Exemplary of this reduction is Gurr’s discussion of the film, summarised by Colombo Machado:

Her essay, “Just a Warrior at the End of the World,” posits white hegemonic masculinity as the cause of the apocalypse in the *Mad Max* universe. As Gurr notes, race in the movie is present through absence, since only white bodies seem to survive the apocalypse. The same white masculinity that killed the world remains unscathed in the seat of power in the figure of Immortan Joe. For Gurr, *Fury Road* then constructs men as killers and women (in the figures of Furiosa, the Wives, and the Vuvalini) as saviors of the world. Gurr concludes that this dualism is essentialist and as dangerous as the forces that provoked the apocalypse in the first place. (Colombo Machado 2022, 124)

Admittedly, Colombo Machado’s review glosses over some of the nuances of Gurr’s reading; yet, it does capture the gist of her argument: “*Fury Road* offers an imperfect freedom at best, a dangerous palliative, and a regressive accounting of gender and race that relies on a profoundly limiting—even deadly—essentialism” (Gurr 2020, n.p.). Indeed, as the paper will demonstrate, Gurr’s larger argument is somewhat flawed, including both her rather simplistic reading of race and the alleged dualism that attributes violence primarily to male characters and reserves the role of “saviors of the world” for women. Race, gender, and ideas around saviourism can certainly be read in more nuanced ways in *Fury Road*; hence, my essay aims at bringing out the subtleties in *Fury Road* as opposed to previous simplistic readings of the film.

Mobility scholars like Böhm et al. have highlighted the contradictions embedded in automobility as autonomous movement: true autonomy cannot be achieved because of the “regimes” enabling and supporting all mobilities (12). Moreover, they argue that automobility malfunctions, resulting in “social, environmental and economic consequences” (13) which render the continued existence of automobility in its current form “impossible”. Similar contradictions are interrogated in *Fury Road*. The film itself is structured around automobility, a dominant audio-visual element and plot device that is instrumental in Furiosa’s narrative. Furiosa’s body is linked to Immortan Joe’s War Rig via her prosthetic arm used to carry and connect with its removable steering wheel. This creates a cyborg-like relationship in which the War Rig

and Furiosa depend on each other to a great extent. Furiosa's need for the War Rig in order to escape and free the women held captive by Immortan Joe speaks to the possibility for liberation. At the same time, the underlying environmental consequences of fossil fuel consumption and Furiosa's reliance on others highlight the limitations of automobility's alleged autonomy.

I set out to interrogate how the vehicle-heavy portrayal of the postapocalyptic world relates to questions around gender, Indigeneity, and environmental justice. Not only has gender a different trajectory in this *Mad Max* film, but both Indigeneity and environmental justice surface in a distinct manner. In the context of my paper, I understand Indigeneity through the lens of the Stolen Generations, referring "to a period in Australia's history where Aboriginal children were removed from their families through government policies" ("Who are the Stolen Generations?"). Given the film's reticence to explicitly 'talk about' Indigeneity, I rely on a more visual angle, with particular groups being linked to common tropes of Indigeneity through their appearance and behaviour. This includes a romanticised and essentialist proximity to nature. The term environmental justice is defined by Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans and Rachel Stein, the editors of *The Environmental Justice Reader*, as "the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment" (2002, 4). Connecting Indigeneity and environmental justice, I understand it as "a social, political, and moral struggle for human rights, healthy environments, and thriving democracies" (Di Chiro 2016, 100), a struggle often led by Indigenous communities.

As previous scholarship brings to light, the depiction of "moving automobiles" (Payne 2017, 112) is integral to all *Mad Max* films. Set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, the film follows Max, initially held captive, and Imperator Furiosa, working for the patriarchal, dictatorial ruler Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne). Both try to escape Immortan Joe who has brought all resources under his reign, exerts complete control over an army of War Boys and abuses his power to hold young, healthy women captive as "breeders," in hope of a healthy male successor. Max, Furiosa, Joe's five "wives" and War Boy Nux (Nicholas Hoult) eventually end up working together to defeat Joe and his all-male supporters during the seemingly endless chase. They drive on in the hope of arriving at the Green Place until they encounter Furiosa's relatives, referred to as the Vuvalini or Many Mothers, a group of elderly biker ladies who join their quest. It is here that Furiosa reveals that she was "stolen" from her family, alluding to Australia's Stolen Generations. From the Vuvalini, Furiosa and her companions learn that the Green Place no longer exists, so after attempting to cross a massive salt plain, Max prompts them to return to the Citadel together instead. Joe has left the Citadel largely unguarded while chasing the traitors. In the ensuing battle, Furiosa kills Immortan Joe, exposing the latter's false claims to immortality. The remaining group of rebels returns to the Citadel safely. Thus, the ending implies that Furiosa, the Vuvalini and the surviving "breeders" will henceforth establish a new society. The film's

references to Australia acquire another layer of meaning when taking into consideration research on automobility that links Australian governance to the automobile, including the car's role in taking Indigenous children belonging to the Stolen Generations (Tranter 2003, also taken up by Soles 2021, 187-188). These nuances make it possible to read automobility in conjunction with the history of the Stolen Generations. Herein, automobility and its reframing by the heroines constitutes a contact zone that serves to question two common stereotypical notions of Indigenous-coded women as both 'close to nature' and outside of automobility.

Payne's refusal of a "tidy interpretation" inspires my own reading of the film, which turns to the often-neglected coding of some characters as Indigenous. While some scholars have emphasised the film's "universal" tendencies by arguing that "*Mad Max* could have been created anywhere" (Haltof 64–67 cited in Reglińska-Jemiol 2021, 109), scholars like Loesch have drawn attention to the Australian elements of the film. She observes that "there are a number of inherently Australian elements woven into its fabric," including "an homage to the iconic Australian film *The Cars That Ate Paris* (and the beginning of Australian film industry as such), allusions to Australian feminist directors, hints at immanent rivalry between car manufacturers Ford and Holden, examples of Australian gallows humour, and decidedly 'Aussie lingo' vernacular" (Loesch 2015, 43). Nonetheless, *Fury Road* manages to balance a particularly Australian dimension with an appeal to global audiences, speaking to environmental concerns in the age of the Anthropocene (see Eckenhoff 2021, 102). These contradictory expectations and readings may, to some extent, be explained due to the film's generic nature: as a blockbuster, it must appeal to a large audience – a premise *Fury Road* fulfilled by making USD365 million at the box office worldwide. Given *Fury Road's* public appeal, it is possible to read the film itself as a "contact zone" (Pratt 1992) in which different sociocultural discourses "meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt 1992, 4). Moreover, the film's ambiguity greatly contributes to its palatability for a variety of audiences.

I concur with Loesch and contend that a universalisation of *Fury Road* may miss out on important dynamics integral to its Australian historical context including its allusions to settler colonialism and the Stolen Generations. The majority of scholars interested in the film and in its engagement with gender politics, automobility and environmental destruction do not comment on the Indigenous coding of characters that has weighty implications when taken seriously. My analysis turns to these implications, drawing on important previous work on Indigenous coding in selected *Mad Max* films by Paul Lester Robertson (2018) and Dallas Hunt (2018). Addressing the subtle representation of the Stolen Generations in *Fury Road*, I argue that a close reading of the racial dynamics portrayed has the potential to change previous understandings of the film. In fact, while the representation of Indigeneity is problematic in many respects, not least due to the almost caricaturist name of Furiosa's clan called

“swaddle dog”, the implications of such a reading of Furiosa and the elderly women, the Vuvalini, as Indigenous are intriguing, particularly when taking into account that Immortan Joe and his War Boys stand in for a “white masculinity” (Yates 2017, 363). I want to suggest that paying attention to indicators of Indigeneity in *Fury Road* allows for two significant (re)interpretations of the film: firstly, it is possible to read the upending of Immortan Joe’s regime as Indigenous and feminist resistance to colonial and patriarchal legacies; and secondly, – and perhaps more significantly – Furiosa’s and the Vuvalini’s active participation in automobility balances their stereotypical proximity as Indigenous-coded women to the land. In fact, neither Furiosa nor the elderly women are victimised in *Fury Road*; instead, they oscillate between being the harbingers of hope and the perpetrators of violence.

Approaching Indigeneity in *Mad Max* films

Before turning to previous work on Indigeneity in *Mad Max* films, it is worth stressing again that current scholarship on the film tends to neglect this aspect of the franchise. This lack of substantial research on this topic underlines the urgent need to address the portrayal of Indigeneity in these cult films. *Mad Max* has a significant audience and fan base to whom the narratives disseminate beliefs and imaginaries; therefore, they make a serious contribution to larger public discourses. In this context, it is striking that *Fury Road*’s reception was marked by a certain blindness to its racialised dynamics: “Despite the backlash against the film for its supposed feminist message, this idea about race was not taken up in the Twitter storm that followed the film’s release.” Gurr continues that “though race does not seem to be salient to the popular reception of the film, its presence is palpable” (2020, n.p.). I seek to foreground this particular dimension in a critical reading which can potentially nuance or even challenge previous readings of the film.

Scholarship on earlier *Mad Max* films suggests a legacy of Indigenous coding in the films of this franchise. In his article “Indians of the Apocalypse: Native Appropriation and Representation in 1980s Dystopic Films and Comic Books” (2018), Robertson engages with the second (1981) and third (1985) *Mad Max* films, arguing that *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* effectively codes the “Euro-Australian marauders” as “Indian” and simultaneously highlights “the whiteness of the civilized Euro-Australian characters in not-so-subtle ways” (73). I will take up this type of paradoxical racial coding in the analysis later. Whereas *Mad Max 2* is obviously racist in its coding, Robertson suggests that *Beyond Thunderdome*’s coding is more obscure and “convoluted” (74). Both the second and third *Mad Max* films, Robertson postulates, “reinforce negative associations of Aboriginal/Native/Indian iconography with the Other and with a threat to white, industrialized civilization” (69). Moreover, the “genre of postnuclear dystopian films presents racially indistinct yet Indian-coded ‘savages’ as a violent threat to attempts at reforming a devastated western civilization (Australia, in the case of the *Mad Max* films)” (2018, 69). Robertson

argues that, contrary to these *Mad Max* films, other apocalyptic narratives from the late 1980s begin to “actively challenge the exploitative and consumerist hegemony responsible for the dystopian settings of the narratives” (69). Citing the *American Flagg!* and *Scout* comic book series as examples, he argues that the “Native characters not only resist the antagonist dominant culture of the future, but they actively work to build a better alternative from the ruins” (69). Viewers of *Fury Road* are arguably presented with a narrative similar to these, although with a significant temporal ‘delay’.

Robertson identifies some important visual elements regarding the racialised dynamics of *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (70-73) and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (73-76). He notices how *The Road Warrior* draws on Native American stereotypes such as “quantities of feathers, furs, and skins” to “code” Max’s opponents “as Indian in a variety of ways” (72). While the villains may be “racially white” (71), they “have turned Indian” (73) in terms of their behaviour and presentation (clothes, etc.). Robertson concludes that the villain’s “Indianness” serves to “emphasize the whiteness of the civilized Euro-Australian characters in not-so-subtle ways” (73). Concerning *Beyond Thunderdome*, Robertson indicates that it “rel[ies] on a complex blend of physical appearance, behaviour and intertextual referents” to create a form of “Native Coding [that] is more complex and convoluted than the straightforward and obviously problematic coding in *The Road Warrior*” (74). He explains how “sympathetic ‘white’ people in the film are also attired in animal skins, feathers, and ‘primitive’ hairstyles” (74). Not only does *Beyond Thunderdome* indicate that white youths “must be saved” from the ‘primitive’ lifestyle they have adopted, but that – while the “canyon home [...] might be sufficient for certain ethnic and racial groups” – the white children must be returned to the city, to ‘civilization’, even if it entails hardships (75). Robertson concludes that “both [*The Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome*] are unquestionable affronts to Native visual sovereignty,” as they imply that Indigenous people “will restlessly yearn for western civilization” (75). Although substantial engagement with previous *Mad Max* films is beyond the scope of my paper, I will allude to some of them in order to highlight how the engagement via narrative and visual language with such discourses shifts in *Fury Road*.

What guides this engagement is Gurr’s observation that “[p]eople of color generally, and indigenous people specifically, are already surviving a postapocalyptic period. Their general absence in *Fury Road* provides what Carol Adams and others refer to as an absent referent – their very invisibility marks their presence as it enacts the settler colonialist fantasy of White supremacy” (2020, n.p.). An ‘absent presence’ is also constituted by the Stolen Generations, at which the film intentionally hints and on which my re-reading of the film focuses. Ultimately, I assess the “subversive potential” (Hunt 2018, 77) of *Fury Road*’s ambiguous racial coding more positively by taking into account the contradictions that Dallas Hunt’s interpretation along the lines of the totem

transfer narrative tends to gloss over in favour of a “tidy interpretation” (Payne 2017, 119).

Stolen Generations and the Postapocalypse: Imagining Indigenous Resistance

As indicated above, the coding in *Fury Road* seems to shift in significant ways compared to earlier films in the franchise. This shift has already been under way in other texts and films as indicated by Robertson (2018) when he draws attention to the portrayal of Native or Indigenous characters in *American Flagg!* and *Scout* as the drivers of more positive change in environmentally and socially broken, postapocalyptic societies. This shift arguably also occurs in *Fury Road*. Here it is Immortan Joe, coded as white, who can be seen as both the cause and effect of malaise under the unholy trinity of “water, gasoline and ammunition” rather than as a symbol of “today’s so-called developed world” (Tanenbaum et al. 2017, 64 in Kendrick and Nagel 2020, 20). In the fourth *Mad Max* film, the attributes of ‘civilised’ and ‘savage’ are turned on their heads, as the white ruler is portrayed as perpetrator with the question “who killed the world” reverberating throughout the film. Concerning Immortan Joe, Gurr suggests:

Immortan Joe is in every sense the figure of the settler colonist: he steals and hoards resources, is fantastically violent, and is a serial rapist whose primary concern seems to be successful primogeniture for whichever son proves worthiest; he rages at the loss of what he considers his property (wives, babies, water); and *he is White*. It is no accident that Immortan Joe’s body is perpetually painted and powdered white. Even his long (and frankly rather luxurious) hair is white. (2020, n.p.)

If we follow Gurr’s logic, then *Fury Road* invites viewers to read settler colonialism as the root cause of all problems and to question any notions of “progress” that may linger in discursive association with it. However, *Fury Road* is not as simplistic in this regard as one may think. Being white and male is not simply equated with being destructive, as Gurr seems to suggest here. Some of the white-painted War Boys – initially under Immortan Joe’s spell and reproducing his system of oppression, but simultaneously suffering from it – end up working towards a change in the political order at the end of the movie. Max himself also contributes to the abolition of this system although his stance has also been problematised as subtracting agency from the female characters.

In the twenty-first century rendition of *Mad Max*, the discourses around civilization and savagery corresponding to settler and Indigenous in colonial discourse which were clearly influential in earlier *Mad Max* films are notably changing. Here, Immortan Joe and the white War Boys take on the ‘savage’ characteristics often associated with the characters coded as Indigenous in the *Mad Max* universe. Yates suggests that the “use of ‘native’ symbols” (362) by Immortan Joe and the War Boys – such as the “body-paint and makeup” (362) – signals an “appropriation and capitalist consumption of Native American customs” which indicates that “hegemonic white masculinity [...] has long

appropriated Native American symbols to mark itself as dominant” (363). Texts produced in the contact zone have a transcultural quality (Pratt 1991, 36); symbols become unstable, open to myriad interpretations and receptions (35). *Fury Road* highlights these slippages and multiple significations. It simultaneously indicates the potential for transforming “hegemonic white masculinity” (Yates 2017, 363) via Nux’s and the young War Boys’ behaviour. The film offers a more overt critique of those in power and in control of resources. As Furiosa’s and Max’s opponent, Immortan Joe becomes the epitome of corruption, violence and oppression – an element of the film which can easily be read as a neo-colonial form of oppression in which Joe’s expression of “white masculinity” (Yates 2017, 363) has come to control all life-sustaining resources as well as life itself. As Waites rightly observes, Immortan Joe’s “grotesque appearance” can be read as a symbol of his “inhumaneness,” which underscores “the savagery with which he rules” (2019, 116). The biopolitics of Immortan Joe are governed by an arbitrariness (see Waites 2019, 116) which renders civilisation as the promise of progress, intellect and logic entirely absurd. Hence, when Furiosa and the Vuvalini decide to overthrow Immortan Joe after Max suggests they return to the Citadel, the film implies a restoration of ‘civilisation’. In contrast with earlier *Mad Max* movies, it is the Indigenous-coded characters who will be in charge of displacing Immortan Joe and his destructive form of rule with a potentially more equal and connected ‘civilisation’ – one in which a “stolen” Indigenous-coded person takes charge with the help of a group of equally Indigenous-coded elderly women.

Although Furiosa and most of the Vuvalini are portrayed as “racially white”, to borrow Robertson’s term, they are coded and inscribed into roles that can be read as belonging to undifferentiated ‘Indigenous’ groups. The representation of Indigeneity is problematic in many respects, not least due to the caricatured name of Furiosa’s clan “swaddle dog”. As Bonny Cassidy suggests in a contribution to *The Conversation*: “These are crude and fictive allusions to Indigenous kinship, but undoubtedly deliberate ones” (2015). It is vital to note the way in which Furiosa tells Max about how she was “taken as a child. Stolen” (1:15:40-46). This comment, although ambiguous in the film’s context as Furiosa was literally stolen from her home by Immortan Joe, will likely indicate to viewers familiar with Australia’s Stolen Generations that Furiosa’s removal parallels that of the Stolen Generations. The use of this word is very significant in the context of Australia’s settler colonial history and the engagement of earlier *Mad Max* films with national myths (see Murphy et al. 2001, 80). The term “stolen” is particularly emphasized since Furiosa adds it to her initial statement in a standalone, one-word sentence. The portrayal of Indigenous characters by white actors and actresses is hotly debated (see Hunt 2018, 75-76). Furiosa being coded as having lighter skin makes sense when read against the racial politics underlying the Stolen Generations: it entailed the forced removal of “fairly light-skinned” (Read 1998, 9) Indigenous children in

an attempted to ‘civilise’ them by erasing their Indigeneity and assimilating them into white settler society.

Not only have members of the Stolen Generations been forcibly removed from their families, but Indigenous communities overall have endured removals from their land under settler colonialism. Moreover, Indigenous communities in Australia have been dealing with the environmental changes that have accompanied settler colonialism (see Bartha-Mitchell 2020, 22). In *Fury Road*, the Indigenous-coded Vuvalini escape Immortan Joe’s tyranny and manage to sustain life despite the harsh environmental conditions. Although Furiosa and her mother were taken away, the community has persisted. Here, the film plays on its Indigenous-coded characters’ ability to survive under such conditions and to navigate a landscape that settlers have repeatedly described as “hostile” (see Kerr 2019, 57, 76) – long before the (filmic) apocalypse has taken place. Much recent scholarship on apocalyptic narratives and the current climate crisis similarly suggests that Indigenous people have been living through various ‘apocalypses’ since the beginning of colonization, i.e. having their land and resources taken by settlers. Exemplary here is Birch’s observation: “For Indigenous people, the impact of climate change is not a future event. It has occurred in the past, and it is occurring now” (2015, n.p.). As Whyte also argues in his article “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crisis”, “the hardships many nonindigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration” (2018, 226). If we take the implications of Indigenous coding in *Fury Road* seriously, then they may be taken to indicate that *Fury Road* is not ‘futuristic’ but speaks to the present moment in many ways. As one of the countries most affected by climate change, Australia is grappling with the lingering “colonial legacy of prioritizing resource extraction, economization, or instrumentalisation of the land over sustainability and eco-systemic health” (Bartha-Mitchell 2020, 22). Immortan Joe epitomises this form of colonial exploitation of resources anchored in a logic of resource extraction which continues to threaten the survival of all life. Many survivors of the Stolen Generations have spoken up about their experiences over the last decades on the one hand and Australia itself has been grappling with the ripple effects of the removal policies on the other. Similarly, in *Fury Road*, it is the “stolen” character and her Indigenous-coded, elderly female supporters who lead the fight against the very man who has taken her as a child.

It is in this context that I deviate from Swan River First Nation scholar Dallas Hunt’s explanation of *Fury Road*’s plot structure inspired by Margery Fee, which takes recourse to the “totem transfer” (2018, 72) to explain the plot structure. The totem transfer narrative points to sage Indigenous characters sharing their precious knowledge with “white settlers” (73) before they themselves are declared ‘obsolete’ and “are used to propagate nationalist

narratives of settlement and naturalize Indigenous disappearance” (75). Although I share Hunt’s reservations regarding the somewhat tokenistic portrayal of Indigeneity in *Fury Road* as well as the concern that some “readings of the film that emphasize its subversive potential ultimately reaffirm a liberal multicultural future that requires Indigenous peoples to disappear” (72), I want to complicate this reading with an eye to the fact that not all Indigenous-coded characters must go “to the grave” in “a/the new world” (77). Admittedly, a number of Vuvalini die in the joint fight against Immortan Joe to which they have pledged their lives. However, Hunt’s reading not only glosses over the central role the other Vuvalini continue to play after the Keeper of the Seeds is killed when saving Furiosa’s life but also neglects the fact that central characters coded as white also go “to the grave” (77) for the political alliance they entered in this postapocalyptic world. It is Immortan Joe’s alleged immortality upon which his cult is built and yet, as Payne rightly observes, death is looming large for the “army of ‘War Boys’ all of whom are sickly and dying (as is he [Immortan Joe])” (112). Taking this line of thought further, Immortan Joe’s unborn heir is fatally injured in Splendid’s womb (Rosie Huntington-Whiteley) when she – a character clearly coded as white – goes “under the wheels”. “Ironically”, as Waites rightly comments, it is Immortan Joe himself who is driving the Big Foot over his heavily pregnant “favorite wife” (2019, 119). Similarly, Joe’s “musclebound son” (DiPaolo 2018, 202) Rictus Erectus (Nathan Jones) is killed by Nux, both coded as white, when Nux sacrifices himself in order to save the rest of the rebellious group. These deaths of white-coded characters make it clear that it is *neither exclusively* the characters coded as Indigenous who are losing their lives on the Fury Road, nor is it only women who lose their lives, but a variety of characters who die for various reasons and whose deaths signify different potentialities. As Gurr suggests:

Glimmers of something different also emerge in *Fury Road*, and it is in these moments that feminism is most productive. Nux’s burgeoning understanding of a different kind of masculinity, despite his severe punishment for his transgression against the patriarch, is one of these moments. The determination of the Wives to protect each other, even by committing violence, is another. Max’s willingness to follow Furiosa’s lead and to work collaboratively and, perhaps most striking, his willingness to share his blood in an intimate act of making relationship, may just tell us that after the apocalypse, if we have the courage to reject the cause of death, better ways to live might begin to emerge, like green things growing out of the parched earth or babies of choice rather than forced and failing pregnancies. (2020, n.p.)

It is this tentative, yet collaborative form of living that is nonetheless the product of pervasive violence as well as the legacies of authoritarianism that emerges when a disabled, Indigenous-coded protagonist ascends together with her supporters at the end. If the fictional character Furiosa is interpreted as a member of the Stolen Generations, then the film’s ending indicates the empowerment of removed and disadvantaged Indigenous groups and individuals in the ‘real’ world. Hence, while *Mad Max: Fury Road* cannot claim

an active involvement of Indigenous voices, it arguably offers subtle, yet intriguing ways of evoking Indigenous resistance. Indeed, the film retains the potential for a collaborative future, since it is three young white-painted War Boys who decide to let down the lift. Thus, the racial dynamics are more complicated – and perhaps even more idealistic – concerning the potential collaborative future since it is premised on the support of the War Boys and the women whom Joe suppressed and exploited under his reign.

Overcoming Stereotypical Thinking via Automobility and Environmental Justice?

Fury Road evidently plays with gendered stereotypes, which raises the question to what extent it manages to rework these stereotypes into more productive ways of thinking and being. As a considerable number of scholars have noted, *Fury Road* engages in “ecofeminist politics” (Eckenhoff 2021, 94), so much so that “[t]he idea of women healing the world becomes another subtext of the plot” (Reglińska-Jemiol 2021, 110). If one adds to this the dimension of racialised dynamics that I have sought to draw out above, viewers may quickly arrive at the stereotypical notion that Indigenous women are particularly close to nature, with the Keeper of the Seeds safeguarding the seeds of life. Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell refers to a similar tendency in theoretical discourses as “a naïve association with Indigenous Australians and ‘greenness’” whereas, indeed, “the principle of ‘Care for Country’ remains an important self-description brought forward by many First Nations peoples” (2020, 22). *Fury Road* both draws on and complicates these ideas by combining ecofeminist perspectives that link the exploitation and violation of female bodies and the environment with a portrayal of Indigenous characters who enact violence and are imbricated in the fossil-fueled automobility system. This combination may be accounted for via the need to survive, but complicates simple, absolutist visions of ‘greenness’.

The female characters discussed here display a readiness towards using violence that is entangled with fossil fuel consumption. This gendered petroculture or “petro-masculinity” (Daggett 2018, 28) of the *Mad Max* films is addressed by Carter Soles. Although his article “*Mad Max: Beyond Petroleum?*” (2019) is insightful in many ways, at times the argument falls into simplistic gender binaries which the film evidently continues to elide: “*Fury Road* seems centrally concerned with Furiosa’s and Keeper of the Seed’s attempts to destroy the patriarchal, death-obsessed, hyper-white society of Immortan Joe and to replace it with a racially hybridized, gender-fluid, *non-violent* matriarchy” (2019, 197, emphasis added). Neither Furiosa nor the Vuvalini are or aspire to be “non-violent” in a setting that portrays violence as a survival mechanism, nor do they entirely reject fossil fuel consumption. Furiosa, for example, “shoots at a light on [the Bullet Farmer’s] vehicle, blasting shrapnel and glass into his eyes, blinding him” (Fletcher and Primack 2017, 350). Furiosa also kills Immortan Joe, using her prosthesis to tear down his mask while clinging on to his vehicle. The Vuvalini also eschew the descriptor “non-violent”: they are armed with

rifles and do not flinch when they must use them to ward off Immortan Joe and his entourage. Shortly after her first appearance in the wasteland, the Keeper of the Seeds even proudly describes how she “killed everyone I ever met out there. Headshots. All of them. Snap. Right in the medulla” (1:23:04-10). The Dag responds to this morbid image with a moral judgement, expecting peacefulness from the Vuvalini: “Thought somehow you girls were above that” (1:23:10-12). Her moral expectations of the Vuvalini – and by implication of Indigenous people – as morally impeccable, the good ones and the peaceful ones are shattered and replaced with greater ambivalence. Hence, neat opposites of violence and non-violence do not hold. Thus, the female characters come to oscillate between being the harbingers of hope and the perpetrators of violence. While this violence shown in *Fury Road* is directed against the oppressors, it leaves the audience with a profound sense of ambiguity as to the future envisioned after the film’s end.

The women, Reglińska-Jemiol points out, oscillate between “victim-warriors and restorers” (2021, 106). But they also oscillate between being restorers and polluters which, somewhat ironically, frees them from the romanticised notion of ‘greenness’. In this regard, Soles suggests that while “a more communal society” seems within reach at the end of *Fury Road*, “it is harder to see her [Furiosa] abandoning trade relations with Gastown and the Bullet Farm or completely forsaking the use of internal combustion technology” (2019, 195). Furiosa’s and the Vuvalini’s participation in automobility balances their stereotypical proximity to the land without disavowing their pursuit of a thriving environment. In fact, neither Furiosa nor the elderly women are complete victims: they are involved in the ongoing pollution inherent in driving; and yet, they seek a greener, more just future, a less excessively extractivist future. DiPaolo (2018, 202) reasons that “[since] she [Furiosa] has experienced suffering, and knows compassion, she will be a benign ruler. She will not become another Ur-Fascist ruler withholding water from the common people.” Fossil fuels and other resources are integral to survival in the wasteland. While there seems to be no future without ‘resources’ as such – a “normalization [...] of the post-apocalyptic world’s dependence upon petroleum” for which Soles reprimands *Fury Road* among other *Mad Max* films (2019, 186) – *Fury Road*’s ending hints at resources at least being distributed more equally in the future. In so doing, it speaks to environmental justice debates and also recognises that environmental movements are often Indigenous-led, without falling into problematic binaries of Indigenous people as either being placed outside of automobility and modernity or as being charged with the essentialist notion of being ‘perfect environmentalists’.

It is in this context that questions around environmental justice become most pressing. Often, Di Chiro (2016, 100) maintains, these struggles are “led by residents of communities most negatively impacted by economic and ecological degradation” with the aim of challenging “the disproportionate burden of toxic contamination, waste dumping, and ecological devastation

borne by low-income communities, communities of color, and colonized territories.” As stated above, environmental justice entails “the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment” (Adamson, Evans and Stein 2002, 4). The environment in *Fury Road* is clearly unhealthy, but sufficient water and food seem to remain at the Citadel and simply need to be distributed differently, more democratically. It is this redistribution, the first sign of a restoration of environmental justice, that the ending hints at when water is made freely available to the thirsting public.

Fury Road may also be deconstructing the gendered binaries that the film’s portrayal of automobility seems to reinforce. Going back to Payne, it is evident that *Fury Road* can produce both feminist and misogynist readings in terms of its gendered portrayal of automobility. Yet, it is notable that most scholarship on the film construes Furiosa’s driving skills as a male character trait (e.g. Gurr 2020, n.p.; Du Plooy 2019, 418). This may make sense within the *Mad Max* universe and within the genre of the road narrative. Both of these seem to have prioritised male drivers for a long time, but there is also plenty of research that suggests otherwise (see Ganser 2009). The repetitive gendering of driving skills reinforces traditional ideas about automobility as a male domain. These ideas do not hold in *Fury Road*: firstly, it is Furiosa’s job to drive the War Rig and the prosthetic limb enhances her bodily connection with the vehicle. Secondly, the Vuvalini have adopted motor bikes as their means of transport. Thirdly, it is during a car chase that the patriarchal ruler Immortan Joe is defeated and killed. Hence, DiPaolo’s suggestion that “the women [...] are brutalized by the inhuman gangs of men who rule the highways” (2018, 200) is not entirely accurate: women have quite a powerful position on the ‘Fury Road’ literally and metaphorically, which neither immediately liberates them from gendered violence nor places them ‘above’ everyone else in a position that lies outside the evidently destructive fossil fuel economy.

The fact that Furiosa and the Vuvalini drive vehicles becomes meaningful in another way when addressed through a historical lens. Tranter has argued that cars played a key role in the removal of Indigenous people of the Stolen Generations and his article “Mad Max: The Car and Australian Governance” (2003) teases out the various roles which cars play in Australian governance. The three roles he outlines are “car as identity, car as myth and car as power” (2003, 68). The article was published more than ten years before *Fury Road* premiered, so it is only informed by the presence of automobility in previous *Mad Max* installments. Hence, while Tranter sees links between the use of cars as the technology enabling the removal of the Stolen Generations, he could not have predicted that the Mad Max franchise itself would make this link explicit in *Fury Road*. Evidently, *Fury Road* enquires into the relations between Furiosa’s Indigenous-coded character tentatively linked to the Stolen Generations and her own imbrication in “the ‘system’ of automobility” (Urry 2004). Concerning cars as enablers of removals, Tranter declares:

The stolen generation reveals the importance of the car for Australian governance. Not only did the car allow for the precise taking of individual children from their families, but it was also a key element of the myth of possession and future prosperity that conceived that removal was an appropriate response to the child's 'problems'. The car's role in the knowing and ordering of individuals allowed for management through the direct application of the car to the control of an individual's body. (2003, 77)

While the film does not state that Furiosa was "stolen" by car, this is likely given Immortan Joe's investment in vehicles. Read through this lens, Furiosa embracing her War Rig and the bodily connection she forms with the vehicle via her prosthesis may be a reclamation of the freedom to move and to control her body. Similarly, Du Plooy suggests that Furiosa's comment about driving the War Rig right after revealing that she was stolen implies that the vehicle allows her "[t]o return" (2019, 428, emphasis in original). Although the return to the Green Place only proves its destruction and disappearance, Furiosa's ability to take over Joe's War Rig, to gain control over and derive strength from it eventually speaks to her ability to reclaim power from Immortan Joe. Clearly, automobility functions as a contact zone (Pratt 1991, 35), with Furiosa and the Vuvalini reclaiming Joe's tools and reappropriating the vehicle. Even though they may favour other modes of transportation, such as motorcycles, they use the tools of the one in power to subvert his position. In fact, Joe's governance is threatened the moment Furiosa's War Rig strays off the prescribed route, moving out of Joe's control and his ability to "manage" (Tranter 2003, 77) her body. Here, Furiosa's central position within the film's portrayal of automobility, despite its negative environmental impact, indicates the reversal of governance: Automobility can be read as a tool for reclaiming control and for upending Immortan Joe's authoritarian rule. Thus, for the Vuvalini as for Furiosa, an investment in procuring a potentially more just future does not immediately go hand in hand with the end of automobility.

These tensions between automobility and environmental justice have produced contrary opinions regarding the film's potential. Following Martínez-Jiménez, Gálvez-Muñoz and Solano-Caballero, Reglińska-Jemiol proposes that "behind its [*Fury Road*'s] success stands the call for ecological awareness and expressing female power, but this call is 'channelled through violence, masculinity, and shrillness for the sake of survival in a highly phallic world'" (Reglińska-Jemiol 2021, 111). Waites, however, gives a more hopeful reading. She claims: "the greed and destruction Immortan sows is, ultimately, unsustainable. In its ashes however, a Phoenix-like rebellion unfolds, and Miller's film imagines the birth of a more compassionate, egalitarian world governed by women and enlightened men in search of a restored mother earth" (2019, 119). Both highlight similar gendered dimensions but come to opposing conclusions about the film's potential to articulate a future vision. Again, neither takes into account the Indigenous coding of the characters nor the lingering memories of the women's own violence, which would more adequately convey the film's ambivalence.

In having Furiosa and the remaining Vuvalini rise, the film raises an important question as to what it would mean for Indigenous people to be in charge of the land again. While greater democratic distribution and better caretaking of humans and the environment are implied, *Fury Road's* ending also underscores the necessity for collaboration across discursively constructed divides. Indeed, it is not only the Indigenous-coded characters who take over, but a few white-coded characters who offer their support. It is this collaboration across divides that seems to hold the greatest potential as it grapples with past injustice in which multiple interested parties contribute to overcoming injustices. In the end, the film retains its ambiguity, as such a change in governance still requires violence and fossil-fueled machines.

Conclusion

Fury Road's dystopian, futuristic setting should not detract from the fact that many of its elements ring true in contemporary Australia, especially for Indigenous communities on whose history of displacement and oppression the film builds. *Fury Road* – evidently a spectacular, entertaining “disaster narrative” (Birch 2015, n.p.) – has divided scholars as to whether its plot simply reproduces an automobile-obsessed, fossil-fuel burning, male-dominated society, or whether its feminist politics, its arguably sensitive portrayal of disabilities (Fletcher and Primack 2017), and its incorporation of an “environmentalist message” (Eckenhoff 2021, 95) have purchase. As my reading suggests, Furiosa and the Vuvalini take on a leading role with Max assuming a supporting role. While there has been a great amount of debate surrounding the gender politics of *Fury Road*, I have shown that much less attention has been paid to the film’s racial coding. Robertson’s attempt at decoding in earlier installments of the saga and Hunt’s arguably reductive reading of *Fury Road* as a “totem transfer narrative” are two exceptions. This paper has entered into a conversation with these and other readings to address the need for further consideration of Indigenous coding in *Fury Road*. My argument has been two-fold: not only does a serious consideration of the film’s coding challenge previous interpretations, but it also highlights the ambiguous role of women – and Indigenous-coded women at that – marked by a willingness to use violence and an embrace of fossil-fueled automobility.

Automobility, as I have indicated, is an underlying plot device and an aesthetic mode in *Fury Road*. The chase propels the characters forward, with Furiosa and the Vuvalini taking the lead and Immortan Joe relegated to the role of the chaser. What arguably propels Furiosa and the Wives forward is an attempt to move beyond Immortan Joe’s oppressive power and to lead better lives elsewhere. Their escape is enabled by the War Rig which reinforces to an extent the notion of freedom via automobility; without a vehicle, the film implies, there would have been no subversion of Immortan Joe’s power. I have stressed the role of Indigenous-coded characters in the removal of Immortan Joe. It would certainly be possible to the viewer so inclined to read the

Indigenous-coded characters' readiness to use violence as yet another stereotype. However, the re-reading proposed here foregrounds the potential of Indigenous-coded characters to eschew a stereotypical portrayal as helpless victims or 'perfect environmentalists'. Again, it is evident that the film's numerous possible interpretations are enabled by its inherent ambiguity.

In this sense, the pop cultural phenomenon *Fury Road* both constitutes and portrays a contact zone: as my discussion of secondary sources shows, the film has initiated heated debates over gender, disability and automobility, creating a forum in which to address these questions anew. Within the narrative itself, competing and overlapping cultural narratives "grapple" with each other, and different groups coded in ambiguous ways "meet" and interrogate the future under "highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths" (Pratt 1992, 4). Power struggles, though not presented as quite such neat binaries in the film, generate a contact zone. Akin to Pratt's analysis of literary phenomena in the contact zone, in which "a conquered subject us[es] the conquerors language to construct a parodic, oppositional representation of the conquerors own speech" (1991, 35), Furiosa and the Vuvalini employ and subvert Immortan Joe's regime of automobility. Thus, *Fury Road* stresses the agency which Furiosa and the Vuvalini are able to reclaim with recourse to automobility.

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