

Enabling the Present: Disability Politics, Reproductive Justice and Temporality in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)

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A war rig rolls out on the open desert, battle flags flapping in the wind behind it. The orchestral score of George Miller's 2015 film Mad Max: Fury Road swells tragically as Imperator Furiosa (played by Charlize Theron) struggles loudly for breath in the backseat of a car, surrounded by the surviving members of her crew. When one of the Wives asks what's wrong with her, one of the Vuvalini women driving the car replies that she is pumping air into her chest cavity, collapsing her lungs. Upon hearing this, Max (played by Tom Hardy) suddenly grabs a knife, points it into her ribcage, apologizes, and plunges it in, whereupon she regains the ability to breathe. He lifts her towards him and she whispers something indistinct before collapsing again. The Vuvalini offers another diagnosis: she is exsanguinated, drained of her blood. Again, Max springs into action, recognizing the value of his universal blood type in this moment. Two of the Wives keep Furiosa awake and another holds the transfusion tube up, upon Max's requests, while he gives her a transfusion. The Vuvalini tends to Max's injection site while he injects the needle into her arm and, with her head in his hands, says: "Max." Looking up at the others, he repeats himself: "My name is Max." Then he turns back to Furiosa: "That's my name" (Mad Max 1:47:10-1:49:27).

This, the penultimate scene of the highly successful science fiction film, marks the first time that the titular character introduces himself to any of the others in his cohort. The film centres on a motley crew revolting against the cruel capitalist regime that rules a post-apocalyptic future. Over the course of their journey together, these unlikely counterparts come to learn from and care for one another in meaningful ways that both affirm and transform their diverse capabilities—within and without their bodies—and thereby have their orientations towards one another, the Earth and time itself profoundly changed. Ultimately, they arrive at themselves through these re-orientations, affirming the notion that we are always made by our relations to others: “to be one is to become with many” (Haraway 4).

Engaged with potent concerns of the Anthropocene, *Mad Max: Fury Road* imagines a world in which fertility—in the land and in bodies—and water have become scarce. This is due at least in part to the ruling regime—“the Citadel”—secretly hoarding water and plant life, and sexually enslaving a group of still-fertile women, named “the Wives,” in the service of producing more soldiers for its army, “the War Boys.” The film focuses on the gender non-conforming leader of this army, Imperator Furiosa, as she tries to help the Wives escape to “the Green Place,” the last remaining fertile land outside of the Citadel, her original home, and the base of “the Vuvalini,” a rogue group of elderly women who guard it. She is joined on her quest by the escaped Max Rockatansky, whose universal blood type had him enslaved as a “blood bag” for the army and a defactory War Boy. The group comes to find that the Green Place has fallen prey to the same ambiguous environmental devastation that has touched the rest of the world, and they are forced to return to the Citadel, where they successfully stage a coup and release the hoarded water to the general population, “the Wretched.”

The film's concern with reproductivity in all its formulations—environmental, social, sexual—anchors this paper. I argue for an alternative to normative reproductive politics “as an embodied, forward-moving, anticipatory, generative process” through a close reading of the narrative and character elements at play in this scene at the crossroads of crip theory and posthumanism, gesturing out to the wider aspects of the film (Murphy). Drawing on Alison Kafer, Brandon Fletcher and Alvin J. Primack, I first analyze the characters involved as possessing disabilities that are framed as generative conditions that affect an appreciation of difference and of interdependence. Next, I widen my lens to the film's narrative structure in order to argue that *Furiosa* actually reproduces these normative reproductive politics in her pursuit of the Green Place. The failure to recover this lost “Eden,” which Michelle Yates deftly notes, is not only predicated on the material limits of the mortal Earth as Rebecca Sheldon claims, but also on the “straight line” that *Furiosa* draws from past to future, which Sara Ahmed locates at the centre of (hetero)normative reproductive politics (555). In the final paragraphs of my essay, I put these readings into conversation with one another through a post humanist perspective, drawing on Michelle Murphy to argue that the film probes the reanimation of “latent pasts” through these characters' engagements with each other's unique (dis)abilities and promotes an appreciation for “othered life.” Referencing Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, I argue that the film centres our “radical immanence” in and amongst others and the Earth as critical to reproductive politics (Braidotti 34). Through its engagements with disability, *Mad Max: Fury Road* renders time as a materially manifest interdependent and adaptable structure, offering a generative alternative to the abstracted and causal time upon which normative reproductive politics are predicated.

If normative politics render reproduction as an anticipatory and individual process, the affirmation of disability as a generative condition in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is particularly meaningful given that it reframes it as an interdependent process that always finds itself in the immediacy of the present. As Alison Kafer argues, disability tends to be framed as an “unredeemable difference” that has no place in the future within American reproductive politics, even in the realm of science fiction—where we might hope for the most imaginative and revolutionary re-orientations from this understanding (74, 69). Not only are a number of characters in the film disabled in the more traditionally understood sense—Max suffers from PTSD and Furiosa bears a prosthetic arm—but, through the lens of crip theory, all the characters might effectively be viewed as “disabled” by the political forces that govern them. Crip theory, a concept coined by Robert McRuer, interrogates the ways in which various marginalized identities are “disabled” by hegemonic forces for defying a narrow definition of an “able” body and mind (Fletcher and Primack 346). All of the characters in my epigraphic scene are disabled in this sense: the Citadel uses Max for his blood, the Wives are sexually enslaved, and even the Vuvalini are disabled in their total expulsion from society and need to fend for themselves.

Yet, this scene also affirms these disablings as endowments of unique capabilities (Fletcher and Primack 347, 354). As a weathered survivalist and outcast, the Vuvalini woman is able to offer deft medical diagnoses, from which Max—a former “blood bag” used to handling injury—is able to intuit remedies, while the Wives—as caregivers and Furiosa’s close kin—are able to offer much-needed support and comfort. Disability is framed as a generative condition whose diverse embodiments engender respect for difference and effect a critique of independence: each skill that these uniquely disabled

characters brings to the table is not only essential in such a moment, but also cannot stand alone—the Vuvalini’s diagnoses are nothing without Max’s intuitive applications, for instance (Kafer 83, Fletcher and Primack 348, 355). The film affirms its characters’ unique disabilities as both valuable and necessary to one another through their engagement with social and even a (quasi-)form of biological reproduction: Max introduces himself for the very first time to the others in this moment, (re)making himself and his relation to them, while they all work cooperatively to revivify Furiosa (Haraway 25). In this sense, *Mad Max: Fury Road* affirms disability as providing a meaningful re-orientation of reproductive politics away from the individualism and self-sufficiency that subtend their normative construction and towards an interdependent understanding that is appreciative of difference.

Fletcher and Primack argue that Furiosa and the Wives’ interdependent quest to find the Green Place marks a turn away from the “disabling understanding of present conditions” that the Citadel inflicts on the Wretched by hoarding natural resources and falsifying their scarcity (351). Yet these authors overlook that, in their conviction that they will find these resources beyond the Citadel walls, these characters reproduce just such a disabling. As Rebecca Sheldon argues, everything is predicated on the promise of the Green Place; without it, they are still reliant on the Citadel (111). While the Green Place is Furiosa’s original home, it is for the Wives—who have lived their entire lives imprisoned indoors—an utterly abstract concept that ultimately fails to come to fruition. Thus, though I agree with Michelle Yates’s assessment that the film marks the failure of Edenic recovery, and with Sheldon’s assessment that this failure is founded (in part) on the material limits of the Earth, I believe they overlook a crucial reason for it: Furiosa unwittingly reproduces the same reproductive rhetoric in which the Citadel is invested.

The Citadel's power, after all, is grounded metaphorically in the idea that those who submit to its rule are "awaited in Valhalla"—another foundational space of Western myth—to which the War Boys who sacrifice themselves and the women who bear them as children against their will have no material connection. Much as their long-awaited and never-to-be-realized "return" to a place that they have never been to serves as justification for real harm to them in the present within the confines of the Citadel, the quest that Furiosa leads not only brings her close to death but also sees two of her cohorts die. "Through such investments in the promise of return, subjects reproduce the lines that they follow" (Ahmed 555). The expectation of the linear tie between past and future that Ahmed locates at the centre of (hetero)normative reproductive politics is reproduced by Furiosa: she demands the inheritance that she imagines her past to guarantee. In circumventing an examination of the "background" conditions that cause the scarcity of natural resources and keep her focused on extending this "straight line" between past and future, we might call into question whether their quest for rediscovery really marks a "turn away" from the disabling of the present that the Citadel effects (Ahmed 547).

When the characters find that the same chemical forces that decimated the rest of the natural world have reached their hoped-for refuge, they encounter what Michelle Murphy calls a "latent past"—a history not-yet-felt that erupts into the present unexpectedly. Though the "chemical infrastructures" that carry pollution across land, air, waterways and generations thwart the possibility of life "into the long future," there are some histories that, Murphy says, demand to be pulled from the sediment. We might note here a scene much earlier in the film that reifies this understanding in a poetically literal way. Erupting suddenly from beneath the sand in the wreckage of a car accident,

Max rips the IV that connects him to the War Boy he is forced to serve out of his neck, an act that is followed by the hissing sound of released air pressure (Mad Max 30:28-31:26). Though done in a stunningly subtle way, this scene pairs with the epigraphic one to make clear that Max's intuition around the need to puncture Furiosa's body from the Vuvalini's diagnosis springs directly from his experience as a "blood bag." Limited as he is in grappling with his own survival in this earlier scene, it is only in his encounter with these surprising others that this latent knowledge is reanimated as a meaningful response to another being.

This meaning-making flattens the natural cultural divide: the chemical forces that induced the environmental wreckage that surround and are latently reanimated in the Green Place are the same that have so heavily irradiated the "War Boys" that they require a constant supply of Max's blood. Though this reanimation of the chemical past in their aspirational refuge forces a "crucial gap in knowledge-making" regarding their orientation towards this hoped-for future, the re-animation of the cruel past that has Max enslaved as a blood bag—made by the same deathly cause—might also provide an invitation to "re-world" reproductive politics around "othered life" (Murphy, Haraway 24). Such a reading confirms that disability is also framed as an especially adaptable condition (Fletcher and Primack 346). In playing with the reanimation of such latent pasts, the film consolidates its critique of linear time: we cannot fully know the forces already at play in shaping our futures. Yet, in putting ourselves in the "contact zones" with others whose heritages and (dis)abilities differ sharply from our own, we might hope to pull meaningful pasts from the sediment that could re-world ourselves and the Earth, both (Haraway 4, Murphy).

It is in this sense that the film might be implicated in a posthumanist tradition: Furiosa aligns herself with the humanist espousal of transcendence of the material present through rational progress, only to be re-oriented towards the “radical immanence” upon which Rosi Braidotti insists by the force of Max’s disability (34). Afflicted suddenly by a PTSD-induced flashback—a young girl from his ambiguous past desperately asking why he did not save her—it is Max who insists that they return to the Citadel upon their disappointing discovery (Fletcher and Primack 348). In this sense, it is his mental disability that re-orientes Furiosa’s reproduction of the Citadel’s obsession with futurity back towards examining the “background” that conditions it: the many lives of the Wretched at stake in the present, urgently demanding the same resources that they hoped to put towards their own limited and figural futures (Ahmed 547). Against the “patrilineal thinking” of the Citadel, “which sees all the world as a tree of filiations ruled by genealogy and identity,” my epigraphic scene marks a site of the “rhizomatic thinking” for which Haraway draws on Deleuze and Guattari: it is a site of becoming oneself through relating to others, a concrescence of beings and the heritages that make them (28, 25). Max’s use as a mere resource for sustaining the “half-lives” of the War Boys, themselves disposable in the name of “Valhalla,” is adapted towards sustaining the specified life of a felt and known other with whom he is in deep relation, urgently and presently (Braidotti 31).

The unique (dis)abilities that each character brings to their relations thus receive the kind of meaningful response that Haraway claims “other-worlding” demands (24). The Wives learn battle skills, Furiosa and the Vuvalini come to appreciate the need to save not just themselves but all of the Wretched, and Max—an individual rogue all his life—learns the value of interdependence. They are “becoming-with,” rather than “self-

making”—investing deeply in their differences as valuable invitations to making meaning (Haraway 33). Though they are collectively oppressed by the same structure, the unique disabilities forced by their specific encounters with this regime are adapted in specific ways that transform each of them in all of their “embodiment and embeddedness” (Braidotti 32). The fact that Max does not introduce himself to the others until he has adapted his disability towards sustaining just such interdependence is testament to the non-individuated subject upon which *Mad Max* centres itself: Max, like the others, becomes who he is in the unlikely “dance of relating in their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to *this* encounter” (Haraway 25). Contrary to what normative reproductive politics portend, it is not the past that informs the future, but what we do with our “radical immanence” amongst others, including Earth itself, in the critical *present* that makes all time—including our many futures and many pasts—both disparate and shared (Braidotti 34, Haraway 25).

Mad Max: Fury Road has its limits—directed and written entirely by men, it centres a mostly white and entirely light-skinned cast and subtly reproduces negative stereotypes about disability as undesirable (Yates 355, 368, Fletcher and Primack 347). Yet the fact that such potently anti-hegemonic and relational understandings of disability, reproduction and time might also be read into a popular Hollywood film is incredibly exciting. This is particularly true as the debilitating effects that factors such as ableism and climate change—among so many others—have on our abilities to create flourishing and meaningful lives continue to be left out of the limited mainstream understandings of reproductive politics, framed as they tend to be along a false binary of “pro-choice” versus “pro-life.”

In their final act upon ascending the Citadel, the Wives and Furiosa release the store of water to all of the Wretched, finally manifesting the lateral form of reproduction that assures just such lives in the present, rather than an abstracted future held in perpetual trust for a privileged few. Centering a self, made by its changing and dynamic relationships, the film does not conceive that the future and past should not be factored into reproductive justice, but highlights the ways in which orientations towards these temporalities often serve to circumvent the cost of real harm in the present (Braidotti 33). As Donna Haraway puts it, “there is no teleological warrant here, no assured happy or unhappy ending, socially, ecologically or scientifically. There is only the chance for getting on together with some grace” (15). Against dominant understandings of reproduction, *Mad Max: Fury Road* frames it as an interdependent and mutable process that extends beyond the body and necessarily implicates other beings, including the Earth. As we move nearer and nearer towards the disappearance of our own green spaces, we must ask ourselves which relations we must seek to reproduce -- to ourselves, to one another, and to our own living Earth -- and which must be fossilized. There is no resting place for thinking through these questions. The time is always now.

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