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“Captive Audiences: Quarantining with *Tiger King*” Hannah Boast and Nicole Seymour

Shortly after a deadly virus leapt (possibly) from bats or pangolins to humans in late 2019,¹ much of the quarantined Western world found itself enraptured by the spectacle of another boundary breach: humans handling wild cats in Netflix’s series *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem, and Madness*. As the program’s full title suggests, directors Rebecca Chaiklin and Eric Goode offered a melodramatic melange of reality TV and true crime, with elements of wildlife programming sprinkled in—thus pushing generic boundaries as well. Within ten days of the program’s release on March 20, 2020, 34.3 million households had followed the machinations of flamboyant private zoo owner Joseph Maldonado-Passage or “Joe Exotic,” his rivalry with animal sanctuary director Carole Baskin, and a motley crew of supporting characters. Within a month, that number had reached 64 million.²

Perhaps it is only appropriate that a program about problematic zoos flourished while a zoonotic disease plagued the world. And indeed, beyond their temporal synchronicity and the human/nonhuman boundary issues they both encapsulate—and even beyond the more obvious link of their common “virality”—the connections between *Tiger King* and the COVID-19 pandemic are surprisingly extensive. For one thing, the experience of lockdown is mirrored in the program’s thematization of confinement and incarceration. Netflix observed of their success with *Tiger King* and other programs, “We expect viewing to decline and membership growth to decelerate as home confinement ends.”³ Meanwhile, much of *Tiger King* features live tigers confined in cages, and many of the featured workers at Joe Exotic’s zoo are formerly incarcerated people. And near the program’s end, an incarcerated and disgraced Joe, perhaps missing the ironic resonance with his earlier activities, compares himself to a wild animal trapped in a cage. There is something disingenuous about a white man decrying his dehumanization by imprisonment, given the racialized nature of mass incarceration and his own anti-black racism—something that, as we discuss later, the program actively erased. But Joe is not completely wrong to say that there is something animalizing about being stuck indoors. One commonly-used phrase under COVID is “cooped up inside,” with “coop” a small enclosure for housing chickens.⁴ Even the term “quarantine” is applied to animals as well as humans—as when, for example, celebrities seek to cross international borders with their pets.⁵ In sum, while “cooped up” like chickens and

¹ Thom van Dooren, “Pangolins And Pandemics: The Real Source Of This Crisis is Human, Not Animal,” *New Matilda*, March 22, 2020. <https://newmatilda.com/2020/03/22/pangolins-and-pandemics-the-real-source-of-this-crisis-is-human-not-animal/>

² Dan Zinski, “Tiger King is One of Netflix’s Most-Viewed Original Shows Ever,” *ScreenRant*, April 8, 2020. [https://screenrant.com/tiger-king-netflix-viewers-data-ratings-popularity/#:~:text=Only%20Stranger%20Things%20season%203%2C%20which%20drew%2036.3%20million%20viewers,for%20Stranger%20Things%20season%203](https://screenrant.com/tiger-king-netflix-viewers-data-ratings-popularity/#:~:text=Only%20Stranger%20Things%20season%203%2C%20which%20drew%2036.3%20million%20viewers,for%20Stranger%20Things%20season%203;); Dominic Patten, “Netflix Reveals Strong Viewership Numbers For Mindy Kaling’s ‘Never Have I Ever’ & Spike Lee’s ‘Da 5 Bloods’ In Earnings Report,” *Deadline*, July 1, 2020. <https://deadline.com/2020/07/netflix-viewership-results-mindy-kaling-never-have-i-ever-steve-carell-space-force-spike-lee-da-5-bloods-earnings-report-q2-1202987697/>

³ Harp, Justin. “Netflix Reveals Tiger King is One of Its Most-Watched Shows Ever as It Releases Viewing Figures.” *Digital Spy*, April 21, 2020. <https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/ustv/a32227946/netflix-tiger-king-viewing-figures/>

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary describes a “coop” as “[a] kind of basket placed over fowls when sitting or being fattened; a cage or pen of basketwork or the like for confining poultry, etc.” “coop, n.1,” *OED Online*. September 2020. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/41020?rskey=RdaNBU&result=1>

⁵ “Johnny Depp’s Wife Charged with Illegally Bringing Dogs Pistol and Boo into Australia,” *NBC News*, July 16, 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/johnny-depps-wife-charged-illegally-bringing-dogs-pistol-boo-australia-n39294>

“quarantined” like dogs, *Tiger King* viewers faced questions about the ethics of caging animals and, perhaps, humans.

Questions of sexuality, reproduction, and family also surround both *Tiger King* and COVID-19. The ethics of exotic animal breeding is a major topic in the program—and, of course, animal incarceration more broadly is often a matter of regulating reproductive processes, from egg-laying and milk-producing to births that produce new sources of meat. And we could argue that both *Tiger King* and COVID-19 have prompted critical reflection on the normative human family. That is, the camp queerness of Joe Exotic—whose three-way marriage to two younger men, among other peccadillos, is highlighted in the program—spoke to many viewers whose loss of childcare and sudden family togetherness highlighted the failures of the heterosexual nuclear unit. Mareile Pfannebecker and James A. Smith agree: “During lockdown, the nuclear family – with all its loneliness, repression, and hidden violences—is back with a vengeance. Viewed from within it, the queer interspecies counter-family of Joe Exotic’s zoo takes on a surprising utopian bent.”⁶ Some readers may recall the salacious factoid that (presumably heterosexual) divorces across China spiked after lockdown was lifted, prompting officials to institute a mandatory “cooling-off period.”⁷ Countless articles and op-eds, too, have revealed how COVID-19 has exacerbated the unequal division of heterosexual household labor, with childcare, cleaning, and, now, homeschooling falling disproportionately to women.⁸ *Tiger King* offers a respite from the normative family not only in terms of its queer familial and species dynamics, but also in not being “family-friendly” viewing. While animals and, specifically, wildlife programming, are often associated with children, the program earned an “MA,” or “mature adult” rating for “violence, language, sexual content, drug use, and more.” “Is Tiger King OK for Kids? No!” concludes “mommy blog” *Lola Lambchops*.⁹

Teasing out these connections, we approach *Tiger King* as two environmental humanists with expertise in film and media studies, animal studies, and queer theory. We propose *liveness* and *queerness* as two keywords to understand the program’s popularity and significance. Liveness unites the contemporary phenomena of documentary broadcasting, streaming services, and social media with the enduring appeal of the older institution of the zoo. Queerness is found in the camp elements of the program and the many drag homages thereto, and in the ways that *Tiger King* disturbs species categories and the institution of the family. Through its engagement with liveness and queerness, the program offers new ways to think about time under COVID-19. Liveness is also present in our own “live” writing of this piece during the first wave of the pandemic in our respective locations of the UK and Germany in summer 2020. At the time of revising this piece in spring 2021, the pandemic has receded in those countries but intensified in others. Liveness complicates the process of writing in ways that remain visible in the text, notably in our use of the present tense. A future reader encountering this piece after the pandemic has ended may be lucky enough to find our verb tenses out-of-time. But from the 2021 present, when we are just beginning to see how COVID-19 has reshaped our world, and with the threat of new zoonotic diseases in

⁶ Pfannebecker, Mareile and James A. Smith. “Tiger King, COVID-19, and the Nature of Work,” *Ceasefire*, May 20, 2020.

<https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/tiger-king-covid-19-and-the-nature-of-work/>

⁷ Kuo, Lily and agencies. “Anger in China at Law Ordering ‘Cooling-Off Period’ before Divorce,” *The Guardian*, May 29, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/29/anger-in-china-at-law-ordering-cooling-off-period-before-divorce>

⁸ Alexandra Villarreal, “Coronavirus pandemic exacerbates inequalities for women, UN warns,” *The Guardian*, April 11, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/un-coronavirus-pandemic-gender-inequalities-women>

⁹ “Is Tiger King OK for Kids? No! Here’s Why,” April 4, 2020. *Lola Lambchops*. <https://lolalambchops.com/is-tiger-king-on-netflix-family-friendly/>

the future, it seems premature to speak of pandemics in the past tense.

Watching on COVID Time

As liveness is a function of time (as in the notion of “real-time”), we begin with the strangeness of time under COVID-19. We propose, first, that the virus has forced many people into a rather queer relationship with time: *chronos* rather than *kairos*.¹⁰ As literary critic Frank Kermode famously clarified, “‘*chronos* is “passing time” or “waiting time” and ‘*kairos* is the...point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end.’”¹¹ We don’t know how or when the pandemic will end, and thus we don’t know how to make sense of anything. This sense of warped, and specifically slowed, lockdown time was captured in Twitter jokes, such as, “‘Experts say we may be as little as two days away from finally leaving the March Age. The next epoch is provisionally being called “April,” and is also expected to last 5-10 million years.’”¹² Less humorously, many of those infected experience unexpected relapses or extended duration of symptoms known as “long COVID”—thus invoking Alison Kafer’s notion of “crip time,” or the ways that disability compels a “reorientation to time.”¹³ For Kafer, “crip time” is the correlative of “queer time;” both involve “departures from ‘straight’ time” that disrupt the expected ordering of our life courses and the organization of past, present, and future.¹⁴ In this sense, we might say that COVID time is “queer” by virtue of the state of suspension into which it has unexpectedly cast many of our lives.¹⁵

But binge watching a television series, as so many know, is a perfect way to pass time, if not to make sense of things. Here, we might note that *Tiger King* “began as a feature documentary.”¹⁶ We would argue that its ultimate serial nature—along with extra episodes, follow-up specials, planned spinoffs, and homage or parody videos, memes, and other paratexts (some discussed below)—has allowed for an even greater passing of quantifiable time, and a sense of unfolding that at least gives shape to our days. Of course, *Tiger King* entered not just any entertainment landscape, but one heretofore defined by content saturation and audience fragmentation; viewing platforms have rapidly proliferated, asynchronous streaming has become the norm, and the era of communal “appointment television” has faded. Lucas Mann has described this scenario in terms of “piece[s] of culture ... moving past and around us at all times, everything simultaneously here and gone. The act of viewership becomes reaching out for something sturdy ... grabbing on tight.” In such a disorienting and isolating time as a pandemic, such “grabbing on” becomes more important than ever. But perhaps more to the point, Mann explains, “[w]hen new content is endless, access constant, any act of laying claim to what to watch, or read or listen to, becomes a

¹⁰ Queer narratologists have discussed the implications of subverting normative time. See, for example, Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser’s *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015).

¹¹ As quoted in Adeline Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 165.

¹² As quoted in Diletta De Cristofaro, “‘Every Day is Like Sunday’: Reading the Time of Lockdown via Douglas Coupland,” *b20*, May 13, 2020.

<https://www.boundary2.org/2020/05/diletta-de-cristofaro-every-day-is-like-sunday-reading-the-time-of-lockdown-via-douglas-coupland/>.

¹³ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵ For other insightful perspectives on this phenomenon, see the co-authored academic blog *Times of COVID-19*. “Times of COVID-19,” 2020. <https://timesofcovid19.temporalities.no/>. Thanks to Hugo Reinert for drawing it to our attention.

¹⁶ Steve Greene, “‘Tiger King’: How Two Directors Untangled the Thorny Web Around Big Cat Owners,” *IndieWire*, March 24, 2020. <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/03/tiger-king-directors-netflix-interview-1202220039/>.

snatch at a moment of slowness ... which is another way of saying relief.”¹⁷ Whether perceived as slowing (a relief from the *typically* relentless pace of life and media) or quickening (a way of *passing* time that seems to have slowed or expanded unbearably under COVID), watching *Tiger King* was a chance to unify or actively manage time that had begun to feel out of control, and uniquely so starting in spring 2020.

What does this have to do with liveness? *Tiger King* created a sense of simultaneity, of a widely-shared reality, that is crucial to a sense of liveness—especially when we recall that subjective feelings of community, immediacy, intimacy, and intense engagement typically define (“real”) live experiences.¹⁸ That is, given the compact and concentrated window of its popularity, this streaming program came about as close as you can get to a traditional network television broadcast (pre-recorded, but available to widespread audiences at the same time) if not a simulcast (performed live, but available to widespread audiences at the same time). Further, as a *documentary* series, *Tiger King* offered us “real life” as a subject.¹⁹ Finally, as we explain in more depth later, *Tiger King*’s aura of liveness is inseparable from the pervasive association of wild animals with liveness. That is, the appeal of viewing animals has always been about their “liveness”—their unpredictability, whether a matter of risk and danger or, alternately, charm and humor.²⁰ Indeed, we could link *Tiger King* to one of television’s earliest successes: the live broadcast of *Zoo Parade* that started in 1950 from Chicago’s Lincoln Park Zoo; by 1952, when one-third of American homes had televisions, 11 million people were tuning in on Sunday afternoons.²¹ In a period of stalled time marked by mass death and anxieties over mortality, these three senses of liveness offered by *Tiger King* (simultaneity, documentary, and animality) proved irresistible.

Here, we are suggesting that “liveness” might be understood as an affective, and not necessarily quantitative, category. We follow the original skeptic of the “live”/“recorded” binary, Philip Auslander, who argued in 2008 that “the concept of liveness describes a historical, rather than ontological condition,” one “whose meaning changes over time and is keyed to technological development;” later, he concluded that “it may be that we are now at a point in history at which liveness can no longer be defined in terms of ... the presence of living ... beings.”²² We will sketch out this idea further by turning now to the emergent phenomenon of “digital drag,” which has likewise flourished in the COVID-19 media landscape and, not incidentally, offered many campy take-offs of *Tiger King*’s protagonists. During a time when drag performers have been losing income from their usual live

¹⁷ Lucas Mann, “How to Miss What Isn’t Gone: Thoughts on Modern Nostalgias while Watching ‘The Office,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 24, 2020.

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/how-to-miss-what-isnt-gone/>.

¹⁸ See Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, “Liveness: Phelan, Auslander, and After,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 29, no. 2 (2015): 70, 72-73, drawing on Bundy et al. and Reason and Barker. *Tiger King* was the most-Tweeted-about TV show from March 20-29, with 1.8 million related interactions. Todd Spangler, “‘Tiger King’ Nabbed Over 34 Million U.S. Viewers in First 10 Days, Nielsen Says (EXCLUSIVE),” *Variety*, April 8, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/digital/news/tiger-king-nielsen-viewership-data-stranger-things-1234573602/>.

¹⁹ The other must-see television show during this period was also a documentary series, the Michael Jordan-focused *The Last Dance* (Jason Hehir, 2020).

²⁰ Live animals more generally have proven quite a draw during COVID-19, with many locked-down audiences seeking out animal encounters via “nestcams” and live feeds from animal sanctuaries that, in contrast to *Tiger King*, offer a sense of life continuing as normal. See Jonathan Turnbull, Adam Seale and William M. Adams, “Quarantine Encounters with Digital Animals: More-than-human Geographies of Lockdown Life,” *Journal of Environmental Media* 1, no. 1 (2020).

²¹ Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America’s Romance with Wildlife on Film*, second edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 133.

²² Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2008), xii; Philip Auslander, “Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (2012).

performances, and when many queer people (such as our students) have had to return to the normative family fold, this phenomenon has offered great relief. While at first our turn to digital drag might seem like a detour, we believe it is justified given how heavily contemporary media phenomena such as *Tiger King* rely upon “paratextual discourse” for their success.²³

***Tiger King* and the Drag Queens**

The most prominent project in this vein is drag queen Biqtch Puddin’s “Digital Drag Show,” which premiered the same day as *Tiger King* on the gaming platform Twitch and featured a mix of live and pre-recorded performances. Having become a gleeful devotee of this show, Nicole can speak to the fact that even pre-recorded performances carry an exciting sense of liveness due to at least four factors: Biqtch’s live hosting and introductions; the chyrons for each performer that list their Venmo, PayPal, or other financial account so that viewers may tip them while watching; the timeliness of many performances (in addition to nods to *Tiger King*, the show acknowledged and fundraised for contemporary causes such as Black Lives Matter protests);²⁴ related social media aspects such as Twitch’s live chat function; and, in Nicole’s experience, texting with friends while watching performances.²⁵ Even when watching archived episodes later (they remain online for a few days before disappearing), that aura of liveness, to riff on Water Benjamin, still inheres. Again, this feeling of liveness was important in the face of mass death, and in terms of creating a pleasurable, playful sense of connection with friends and strangers in a time of disconnection and isolation.

One relevant performance featured on the Digital Drag Show was that of Glasgow, Scotland-based drag artist Rujazzle.²⁶ Over a gleefully chaotic 5 minutes and 55 seconds on the April 17, 2020 show, Rujazzle performed as both Carole Baskin and Joe Exotic, lip syncing songs including Survivor’s “Eye of the Tiger” (of course), Kelis’s “Caught Out There,” and “What Is This Feeling?” from the musical *Wicked*, as well as original dialogue from *Tiger King* and other Internet parodies thereof.²⁷ The Kelis and *Wicked* songs, with their respective choruses of “I hate you so much right now!” and “Loathing, unadulterated loathing,” speak humorously to the Joe-Carole rivalry. While performing the latter song, Rujazzle used a mostly seamless-looking split screen to appear simultaneously as both people. This visual technique perhaps allows us to reflect on the simultaneity of the world’s embrace of the *Tiger King* phenomenon, while adding another level to the typical gender-bending of drag performance.

[Drag artist Rujazzle dazzles as “Joe Exotic” in 2020. Photo courtesy of Rujazzle.]

²³ John Mercer and Charlie Sarson, “Fifteen Seconds of Fame: Rupaul’s Drag Race, Camp, and ‘Memeability.’” *Celebrity Studies* (2020): 11.

²⁴ Digital Drag Show supporters raised \$16,000 in the latter’s honor for civil rights organization Color of Change.

²⁵ It’s worth noting here that John Mercer and Charlie Sarson explain that social media is the way that drag queens have to build their profile: “Having neither the financial resources nor the social and cultural capital of [Hollywood A list] stars, [drag queens] are often their own publicity machine and sustain their celebrity statuses online through Instagram, Twitter, and associated social media.” Mercer and Sarson, “Fifteen Seconds,” 9.

²⁶ Rujazzle, “TIGER KING... by a Drag Queen! RUJAZZLE,” YouTube, April 18, 2020, video, 5:55, <https://youtu.be/Jh4xlHi6iBA>.

²⁷ This lip-syncing of dialogue may remind some of the TikTok videos of comedian Sarah Cooper mouthing audio of Donald Trump—which went viral just a week later.

Scholars have explained how the meme, just like drag performance, “live[s] off ... [the] possibilities of remix and alteration.”²⁸ *Tiger King*, with its colorful characters, memorable one-liners, and mashup of genres, provided the perfect jumping-off point for memeability, drag, and virality to come together. Relatedly, we should consider the ephemerality of digital drag homages to the program. On April 4, 2020, U.S. drag queen Mimi Infurst hosted an entire *Tiger King*-themed “online drag show” on Facebook Live, for which she promised to “serv[e] Carole Baskin realness.”²⁹ Both of us sadly missed this event, as the URL now explains that “[t]he link you followed may have expired.” The “liveness” of drag takes on *Tiger King*, and of the program itself, seems to have a particular shelf life. If we apply performance theorist Peggy Phelan’s work in a perhaps counterintuitive direction, we see again the liveness of *Tiger King*; as Phelan argues that ephemerality is what defines live performance,³⁰ then the ephemerality of a viral sensation—or perhaps more precisely, the *expectation* of its ephemerality—necessarily gives it a certain sense of liveness, as well as a potential sense of queerness. As scholars such as Jack Halberstam have shown, ephemerality has often been seen as a queer quality, given how LGBTQ+ lives have not necessarily been structured for longevity, in light of everything from biological familial rejection to the AIDS crisis to the statistical rarity of same-sex parenthood.³¹

We almost suspect that *Tiger King*’s very title was designed to invite drag responses; another drag queen who has appeared as both Joe and Carole, the UK’s Cheryl Hole, quipped in a related Instagram video, “Who really is the Tiger King—or Queen??”³² But even if it were titled differently, *Tiger King* is so deeply imbued with queer flamboyance and what Susan Sontag called “pure” or “genuine Camp”—a “mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive”—that its deliberately campy, semi-mocking embrace by drag performers seems inevitable.³³ After all, this is a program in which the (anti-)hero sports a bleached-blond mullet, wears eyeliner and an eyebrow ring, once ran for President of the United States, and launched a music “career” during which he lip synced to someone else’s pre-recorded vocals—not unlike a drag queen. As for Carole, it was not hard for Joe to skewer her by hiring a look-alike for his music video titled “Here Kitty Kitty,” given her signature penchant for flower crowns and animal print everything; likewise, it has not been hard for drag queens to act as her look-alikes in turn. And we haven’t even mentioned the melodramatic facts, tailor-made for campy drag take-offs, that Joe tried to have Carole murdered while also accusing her of murdering her first husband. Of course, the culture of camp that has arisen around *Tiger King* is not limited to drag; it includes everything from TikTok commentary and parodies to a mini-Broadway musical.³⁴ Put succinctly, *Tiger King*

²⁸ Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light, as quoted in Mercer and Sarson, “Fifteen Seconds,” 6.

²⁹ Mimi Infurst (@MimiInfurst), “Tiger King online drag show—I will be serving Carole Baskin realness sat Rsvp here <https://www.facebook.com/events/1340899392765910>.” Twitter, April 1, 2020, <https://twitter.com/mimiinfurst/status/1245402160025808897?lang=en>. “Realness” is a turn of phrase from drag culture that refers to the “flawless execution of a particular impression or performance.” Gary Hartley, “A Beginner’s Guide to Drag Terminology,” *Cape Town Magazine*, n.d. https://www.capetownmagazine.com/arts-culture/a-beginners-guide-to-drag-terminology/104_22_19320

³⁰ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 31, 146.

³¹ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2.

³² Similarly, the version of Rujazzle’s performance now posted on YouTube promises in its title, “TIGER KING... by a Drag Queen!”

³³ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1965): 6, 7.

³⁴ Broadway.com, “Kristin Chenoweth—‘Little Pieces’—TIGER KING: THE MUSICAL (A Parody!)—(Official Video),” YouTube, video, April 15, 2020, 4:37. <https://youtu.be/bAQau6pJpPA>.

entered a particular media landscape already marked by “the mainstreaming of drag performance *and* a wider investment in camp humour and celebrity culture.”³⁵

The drag/camp embrace of *Tiger King*’s aesthetics—the “obsess[ion] with the fashions” that Cheryl Hole’s video articulates—necessitates a consideration of the specific aesthetics of the tiger itself. One important source is the representational legacy of British imperialism in India. British colonizers saw the tiger as a particularly cruel and ferocious animal, imagined alternately as majestic and as vermin.³⁶ The tiger has similarly served as a “metaphor of insurrection,” from imperial accounts of the 1857 Indian Rebellion against British rule to the anti-colonial iconography of the Tamil Tigers.³⁷ This history has shaped the common perception of tigers as duplicitous and cunning—which, we might note, is also a rather queer marking. Indeed, one of the most famous tigers in popular culture, Shere Khan from Disney’s *The Jungle Book* (1967), inaugurated the trend of the “mincing, sibilant, underhanded ... gay villai[n]” in animated film.³⁸ The tiger, then, holds ambivalent associations with power, sexuality, and subversion that shape its meaning in *Tiger King* and in drag responses.

Joe Exotic’s name takes on particular valence in this light. A twist on the “Average Joe” (the title of the first episode being, in fact, “Not Your Average Joe), “Joe Exotic” combines white trash aesthetics with the implication of exotic animals and “exotic dancers” AKA strippers—yet another kind of illicit sexuality.³⁹ Relatedly, tiger skin serves as “erotic shorthand for sex, pleasure and desire” and for “female sexual agency.”⁴⁰ Josephine Baker, Kim Novak, and countless other sultry starlets of the past have posed on tiger pelts, evoking the tiger’s association with “Oriental” sensuality and luxury. Similarly, the animal print clothing that Carole so favors, layering multiple different prints at once, is associated with female youth and sexuality, as reflected in the presumed consumer anxiety behind fashion advice on “how to wear animal print ... and look classy!” “at any age!”⁴¹ These associations set up *Tiger King* for its drag appropriations; the program and its reception, we argue, would not work the same way with any other animal.

³⁵ Mercer and Sarson, “Fifteen Seconds,” 3, our emphasis. Esther Newton’s 1978 preface to her foundational work on drag, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, predicted this turn: “[T]he gay sensibility, like that of other minorities before it, is finding, in watered down form, a larger audience” (xii).

³⁶ John Miller, *Empire and the Animal Body: Violence, Identity and Ecology in Victorian Adventure Fiction* (London: Anthem Press, 2012), 37. Both meanings conveniently justified the tiger’s elimination, whether as demonstration of imperial might or as “care” towards India’s colonized population. Miller, *Empire and the Animal Body*, 37-8.

³⁷ Miller, *Empire and the Animal Body*, 40; John Miller, “Rebellious Tigers, a Patriotic Elephant and an Urdu-Speaking Cockatoo: Animals in ‘Mutiny’ Fiction,” *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17, no. 4 (2012): 480.

³⁸ Hugh Ryan, “Why So Many Disney Villains Sound Gay,” *Vice*, July 14, 2015. https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/5g9e4d/the-number-of-gay-animated-villains-will-surprise-you-456. Noël Sturgeon has also argued that “the figure of the evil male homosexual often inhabits the ecovillains” of popular environmentally-themed children’s films, including Disney’s *The Lion King*; Scar of that film is a clear descendent of Shere Khan. Sturgeon, *Environmentalism in Popular Culture: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of the Natural* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 111.

³⁹ Here, we can’t help but recall that *other* flamboyantly queer tiger handler, Roy Horn of Siegfried and Roy, who died of COVID-19 a few weeks after the premiere of *Tiger King*, and who survived a gruesome tiger attack just like Joe Exotic’s genderqueer employee Kelci “Saff” Saffery. A 2008 book about the pair, *The Secret Life of Siegfried and Roy: How the Tiger Kings Tamed Las Vegas*, by Jimmy Lavery et al., may have inspired the title of the program in question.

⁴⁰ Stacy Gillis, “Sin and a Tiger Skin: The Stickiness of Elinor Glyn’s *Three Weeks*,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 29, no. 2 (2018): 218, 229.

⁴¹ Lindsay Albanese, “HOW TO WEAR ANIMAL PRINT (and look classy!),” YouTube, 19 October, 2019, video, 6:48. https://youtu.be/c6M5sbWA4_Y. “How to Wear Animal Prints at Any Age,” *Fabulous After 40*, n.d. <https://www.fabulousafter40.com/how-to-wear-animal-prints-at-any-age/>.

Zoo Time

The popularity of *Tiger King* is inextricable from the broader cultural meanings of the zoo, an institution that similarly bears concerns with liveness and time, queerness and the family. Zoos are a major North American entertainment experience, alongside movie theaters, theme parks, and football games, with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) reporting that its member institutions in the U.S. receive over 183 million visits per year.⁴² AZA-accredited zoos make up only 10% of North American zoos, partly because accreditation requires higher welfare standards.⁴³ There are thus many more visits to American zoos than are captured in AZA statistics, including visits to Joe's Greater Wynnewood Exotic Animal Park, which, unsurprisingly, is not accredited. Like all the genres that *Tiger King* brings together—reality television, true crime, and wildlife programming, as well as drag responses—the appeal of zoos is founded on liveness. Zoos offer a site of ideally instantaneous encounter with live, “wild” creatures, particularly “charismatic megafauna” including elephants, gorillas, and, of course, tigers.⁴⁴ In modern zoos, the liveness of animals is typically conscripted into conservation messaging, with the live encounter “disciplining” the zoogoer into an appropriate attitude towards nature.⁴⁵ In the case of tigers, the figures indicating the need for conservation are stark: classified as an endangered species, with three species already extinct, only 3,500 tigers remain in the wild.⁴⁶ Tigers are quite literally running out of time.

And indeed, zoos often frame their conservation efforts as “buying time” for wild animals,⁴⁷ or in relation to a “ticking clock” to which we must attend in order to avert future extinctions.⁴⁸ We might therefore understand the zoo more broadly as an institution for managing time. As such, it is a curiously appropriate setting for a documentary series collectively consumed during the fragmented time of lockdown. Day-to-day life in the zoo involves the strict regulation of animal time, in which animals suffer both an excess and lack of time.⁴⁹ For example, Joe Exotic's tigers often seem extremely bored, lacking not just space but agency over how they spend their time. These tigers endure an endless expanse of time before them, yet in other ways their life cycles are heavily circumscribed by breeding programs and the premature endings of their lives when they age out of cuteness and are deemed no longer valuable. (Joe was convicted of, among other things, shooting and killing

⁴² “Visitor Demographics,” *Association of Zoos and Aquariums*, n.d. <https://www.aza.org/partnerships-visitor-demographics>. The popularity of zoos sits in a mutually reinforcing relationship with television, with the zoo a common setting for wildlife programming from *Zoo Parade* onwards. *The Secret Life of the Zoo* (2016-), for instance, filmed by Channel 4 in the UK's Chester Zoo and narrated successively by popular British actors Olivia Colman and Tamsin Grieg, has run for nine seasons.

⁴³ Irus Braverman, *Zooland: The Institution of Captivity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 158.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁶ “Tigers,” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, n.d. <https://www.fws.gov/international/animals/tigers.html>.

Questions remain over the ethics and actual conservation value of zoos keeping animals in captivity, not least when zoos rarely contribute animals to reintroduction efforts and most reintroductions fail. See Mark R. Stanley Price and John E. Fa, “Reintroductions from Zoos: A Conservation Guiding Light or a Shooting Star?,” *a2*, edited by Alexandra Zimmermann, Matthew Hatchwell, Leslie A. Dickie, Chris West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 166-7.

⁴⁷ William G. Conway, “Buying Time for Wild Animals with Zoos,” *Zoo Biology* 30, no. 1 (2010).

⁴⁸ On this rhetoric, and on other functions of time in the zoo, see Marianna Szczygielska, *Queer(ing) Naturecultures: The Study of Zoo Animals*, 2017, Central European University, PhD dissertation, ch. 3. https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2017/szczygielska_marianna.pdf.

⁴⁹ In drawing attention to the relationship between time and the ethics of animal captivity we draw on Dinesh Wadiwel, who has recently reframed the injustices of industrial animal agriculture in terms of the “working day” and curtailed life span of farmed animals. Wadiwel, “The Working Day: Animals, Capital and Surplus Time,” in *Animal Labour: A New Frontier of Interspecies Justice?*, edited by Charlotte E. Blattner, Kendra Coulter and Will Kymlicka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

five tigers, in violation of the Endangered Species Act.) The regulation of nonhuman time in the park is further premised on the control of the time of factory-farmed animals; we see workers unloading expired supermarket meat for the tigers (and themselves) and hacking up a feedlot cow rejected for human consumption to become tiger food. A concern with time is also built into the structure of the program, which begins in media res with Exotic “doing time” in the Grady County Jail.⁵⁰ Structured around the parallel experiences of animal and human incarceration, *Tiger King* reminds viewers of their own unwanted, indeterminate confinement, and of the expansions and contractions of COVID-19 time.

The management of time in the zoo is also a management of sexuality, one which serves to naturalize heteronormative models of nonhuman and human life. Greater Wynnewood Exotic Animal Park sits in curious relation to this role, both reinscribing it and subverting it, as we discuss below. The connection between zoo time and sexuality occurs in conservation rhetoric, with zoogoers called upon to preserve endangered species so that their future children will be able to see them. This is a version of the “heterosexist, pro-reproductive rhetoric” that Nicole, drawing on Lee Edelman’s notion of “reproductive futurism” (2010), has identified as a familiar environmentalist trope.⁵¹ Even the most “ethical” zoo is oriented towards a heteronormative future via the “baby” animals it must produce in order to justify its purported conservation goals and, more pertinently, to attract visitors.

[Cuddling up to wild cubs in *Tiger King* (Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin, 2020).

At Greater Wynnewood Exotic Animal Park and in its travelling exhibitions, tiger cubs are the primary draw. Available to be bottle-fed, petted, and posed with in scenes that violate the prohibition in AZA-accredited zoos against almost all physical contact between visitors and animals, the cubs allow visitors to participate in a distorted vision of cross-species parenting and, in particular, of mothering, through which humans can both coo over and dominate a temporarily diminished fearsome beast.⁵² Also significant is the fact that the visitors to Greater Wynnewood Exotic Animal Park shown on screen are typically in family groups, mirroring the wider demographics of zoogoing. The AZA states that 69% of visitors to its zoos annually are parties with children, quantifying the benefits of these visits in terms of children’s and family experiences.⁵³ The reputation of the zoo as a locus for “quality family time” to be recorded for the future in family photographs and videos strengthens its potency in activating heteronormative environmental sentiments.⁵⁴

Joe Exotic’s zoo relies on these “family-friendly” associations for its income and reinforces standard heteronormative zoo models of animal and human life through its breeding programs. Still, his zoo is an inappropriately “adult” space, seen most evidently in

⁵⁰ On the experience of time in prison, see Thomas Meisenhelder, “An Essay on Time and the Phenomenology of Imprisonment,” *Deviant Behavior* 6, no. 1 (1985). On zoo and prison comparisons, see Braverman, *Zooland*, 86-89.

⁵¹ Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 7.

⁵² It is noteworthy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that heavy restrictions on direct animal contact in AZA-accredited zoos exist in part due to the risk of spreading zoonotic disease. On no contact, see Braverman, *Zooland*, 66, 147. On the dynamic of protection and violence in our orientation to the “cute,” see Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), Ch. 1.

⁵³ The AZA website records that “93% [of surveyed visitors] agree their family enjoys seeing animals up close at zoos and aquariums” and “94% feel that zoos and aquariums teach children about how people can protect animals and the habitats they depend on.” “Visitor Demographics.”

⁵⁴ Bonnie Hallman and S. Mary P. Benbow, “Family Leisure, Family Photography and Zoos: Exploring the Emotional Geographies of Families,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 8, no. 6 (2007): 871.

gift shop merchandise that includes Joe Exotic-branded condoms, thong underwear, and lubricant gel instead of animal toys, keyrings, and pencils. Exotic seems congenitally inappropriate, flouting norms of queer respectability through his flamboyant appearance, triple marriage, and love of tigers, with their associations with glamour, drama, and risk. His obsession with animals seems somewhat queer in its suggestion of arrested development or temporal “interruption,”⁵⁵ given the persistent marketing of zoos and animals as an interest of children. This refusal of normative temporalities is further seen in Exotic’s position as the head of a “queer family” of zoo workers. The workers appear to enact what Harlan Weaver describes as “intimacy without relatedness” or “queer kinship” through their common care for the tigers who sit, like them, at the margins of society, and with whom they rather touchingly share their expired meat.⁵⁶ It is worth noting that this community was far from ideal; we ultimately learn of Joe’s poor treatment of his workers and partners, while the tigers are held captive in squalid conditions. Nevertheless, even in these failures, *Tiger King* offers a glimpse of an alternative mode of familial relations to those that feel so oppressive to many in the pandemic present.

Tiger King’s ambivalent queer potentialities manifest not only in its orientation to its subject matter—the heteronormative institutions of the zoo and the family—but also in terms of genre. One of the documentary genres in which we situate *Tiger King* is wildlife programming, which mirrors the tendency of zoos to affirm the naturalness of heterosexual, nuclear families, and normative life trajectories.⁵⁷ The “classical” wildlife documentary, as Cynthia Chris notes, has “frequently contextualized animal behaviors in narratives that allegorize them as lessons in [heteronormative] sex roles and parenting” and “typically features an individual, anthropomorphized animal protagonist, and is often constructed as a ‘coming of age story.’”⁵⁸ Wildlife documentaries serve to consolidate the family unit through a shared experience of viewing content seen as morally improving in its apparent educational value, serious tone, and prompting of “higher” emotions such as awe through a depiction of “elevating” moments of animal life.⁵⁹ The scheduling of the wildlife documentary, typically found in the UK in the “family-friendly” viewing slot of the evening hours before the 9pm watershed,⁶⁰ has allowed it to play a related role to the zoo as “quality family time.” *Tiger King* is likely to recall for many viewers the animal and wildlife programming that has been a regular feature on our televisions since *Zoo Parade* in the 1950s. As with its engagement with the institution of the zoo, *Tiger King* draws its appeal from both adhering to the conservative norms of the wildlife documentary genre and challenging them.

In its reminder of these different family activities, *Tiger King* activates a form of nostalgia that increases the program’s appeal by allowing the viewer to recall an earlier, perhaps simpler time. Its adult audiences may be prompted to recall family viewing practices

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), xxii.

⁵⁶ Harlan Weaver, “Pit Bull Promises: Inhuman Intimacies and Queer Kinships in an Animal Shelter,” *GLQ* 21, nos. 2-3 (2015), 352, 343.

⁵⁷ Gay animals have recently become a popular zoo and documentary novelty, particularly gay penguins. The draw of these animals is largely based on their participation in a homonormative narrative of pair bonding and reproduction. See, for instance, Liam Stack, “Gay Penguins, and Their Hope for a Baby, Have Enchanted Berlin,” *New York Times*, August 14, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/14/world/europe/male-penguins-adoption-egg-berlin-zoo.html>. Alternately, as Cynthia Chris points out, gay animal behavior is often portrayed in wildlife documentaries as evidence of sexual immaturity. Chris, *Watching Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 125.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁹ See Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018), Ch. 2.

⁶⁰ Barbara Crowther, “Viewing What Comes Naturally: A Feminist Approach to Television Natural History,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 20, no. 2 (1997): 295.

in childhood, a reminder that may have a melancholy inflection, since, while many families were forced together during the pandemic, others were forcibly kept apart, with the young and early adults most likely to have Netflix subscriptions often isolating in shared, rented homes.⁶¹ Equally, by violating the norms of the wildlife documentary, *Tiger King* offers illicit thrills. It punctures the genre's pomposity, yet also, more troublingly, offers an opportunity for "slumming it" by voyeuristically observing the lives of Exotic and his associates.⁶² Some might argue, particularly on the basis of the latter, that *Tiger King* is not wildlife programming or documentary programming at all but rather reality TV. Susan Murray has noted "the belief that documentaries should be educational and informative, authentic, socially engaged, independently produced, and serve the public interest, while reality TV programs are commercial, sensational, popular, entertaining, and potentially exploitative and/or manipulative."⁶³ We would therefore describe *Tiger King* as an example of what Nicole has called "low environmental"—though not necessarily environmentalist—"culture."⁶⁴ That is, it raises questions about serious topics such as animal incarceration and extinction while maintaining none of the "classy" affect of most works that tackle those topics. In doing so, *Tiger King* joins a growing canon of environmental works that trouble the boundaries of genre.

Tiger King's Afterlives

Reality television is infamous for its deceptive and manipulative editing. Even so, the decision of directors Chaiklin and Goode to excise Joe's anti-black racism is suspect given the program's core themes of incarceration and captive time.⁶⁵ As activists and scholars have shown, the United States criminal justice system functions as a racialized instrument of social control, with mass incarceration—a phenomenon that disproportionately affects young black men—serving "to define the meaning and significance of race in America."⁶⁶ The elision of Joe's racist views in a program structured around his incarceration is curious, to say the least. (It also seems curious given the exoticized and racialized connotations of the tiger.) The program's failure in this regard became starkly apparent immediately after its release in Spring 2020, as worldwide Black Lives Matter protests unfolded and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BIPOC communities came to light. We might further understand Joe's abjection and control of animals and his racism as intertwined, premised on an exclusion of both animals and Black people from the category of the "human" and therefore beyond the limits of moral considerability.⁶⁷ Perhaps *Tiger King's* creators thought the

⁶¹ Amy Watson, "Netflix Subscriptions in the U.S. 2020, by Generation," *Statista*, May 28, 2020.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/720723/netflix-members-usa-by-age-group/>.

⁶² Hannah Yelin, "Tiger King is Popular Because We Love to Laugh at 'White Trash'—Here's Why That's Dangerous," *The Independent*, April 8, 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/tiger-king-netflix-joe-exotic-carole-baskin-eugenics-zoo-a9454491.html>.

⁶³ Murray, "I Think We Need a New Name for It': The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV." In *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, edited by Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 65-81.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁵ Tom Skinner, "'Tiger King' Co-Creator Says Racism from Joe Exotic Was Cut from Documentary," *NME*, April 7, 2020. <https://www.nme.com/news/tv/tiger-king-joe-exotic-racism-cut-from-show-2642740>

⁶⁶ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 18.

⁶⁷ This pattern of thought, as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson notes, is not restricted to far-right ideology but built into the structures of European humanism. Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Anti-Black World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 4. A number of recent works in Black Studies have taken on the fraught relationship between Black and animal activist movements and the troubling analogues between Black and animal experience frequently made in the context of animal advocacy, including Jackson's *Becoming Human*, Joshua Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (Cambridge: Belknap

program needed an implicit fantasy of racial harmony to function as a collective experience in the way that it did. Nevertheless, for a program to tackle the breaching of human/nonhuman boundaries at this moment *without* addressing race feels disingenuous, and reminds us again not to idealize the queer potential of *Tiger King*.

As a piece of trashy pop culture that is now permanently tied to its moment of release during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Tiger King* might seem like a show that would date quickly and soon be forgotten. Nevertheless, this seemingly ephemeral program continues to extend its temporality through various afterlives. In at least one instance, the paratextual drag culture discussed above extended the shelf life of the program: “You might have thought the *Tiger King* craze was over,” observed Kristy Puchko, but on July 1, 2020, drag queens Trixie Mattel and Katya released an episode of their popular Web series *I Like to Watch* centered on it.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, at the time of writing, Carole Baskin has just started a stint on *Dancing with the Stars*, and fictional adaptations of *Tiger King* starring comedians and camp figures such as Nicolas Cage and Kate McKinnon are currently in the works.⁶⁹ The program also briefly revived the fortunes of Joe’s zoo, renamed “Tiger King Park” by his former business partner Jeff Lowe and visited by flocks of tourists after Oklahoma lifted its stay-at-home restrictions in May 2020, although it has since been reported as closed for good.⁷⁰ A recent viral Tweet reminds us, alongside a wry comment on the winter holidays and commercialization, that the queer pandemic temporalities we have described are far from over: “Can’t believe it’s nearly lockdown again already. Swear it gets earlier and earlier every year. I walked past a house ... and [the inhabitant] was already watching tiger king.”⁷¹ In fact, both of us, writing in London and Munich respectively, are anticipating a new set of lockdowns. And of course, this Tweet reminds us that the virus is still very much with us. However unfashionable *Tiger King* might be by the time this essay appears in print, the program and its reception offer unlikely insights into the temporalities and ecologies of pandemics, and a glimpse—even if a flawed one—of the queer kinships that many of us found ourselves craving from the confines of the locked-down family home.

Press, 2020), and Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). For an overview of the core debates, see Boisseron, *Afro-Dog*, 2018, Ch. 1.

⁶⁸ Kristy Puchko, “Trixie Mattel and Katya Review ‘Tiger King.’” *Pajiba*, July 1, 2020.

https://www.pajiba.com/tv_reviews/drag-queens-trixie-mattel-and-katya-review-tiger-king.php.

⁶⁹ Libby Torres, “Everything we know about the competing ‘Tiger King’ adaptations, which reportedly star Nicolas Cage and Kate McKinnon,” *Insider*, May 5, 2020. <https://www.insider.com/tiger-king-remake-adaptations-nicolas-cage-kate-mckinnon-2020-5>.

⁷⁰ Eric Todisco, “Tiger King Fans Flock to Joe Exotic’s Zoo for its Reopening After Coronavirus Shutdown.” *People*, May 6, 2020.

<https://people.com/pets/tiger-king-fans-crowd-joe-exotic-zoo-reopening-coronavirus/>.

Miranda Bryant, “Tiger King zoo closes suddenly after license suspended,” *The Guardian*, August 19, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/aug/19/oklahoma-zoo-tiger-king-closes-suddenly-after-license-suspended>.

⁷¹ Harvey Hawkins (@harvhawkscomedy), “Can’t believe it’s nearly lockdown again already. Swear it gets earlier and earlier every year. I walked past a house earlier and he was already...,” Twitter, September 11, 2020. <https://twitter.com/harvhawkscomedy/status/1304483781160701952?lang=en-gb>.