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From *Tiger King to Joe vs Carole:*
Postmodern Murder Media in the True Crime Carnavalesque

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Abstract

This article provides critical perspective on the criminological themes evident in the Netflix true crime streaming television documentary series, *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness*, which emerged as a popular cultural phenomenon during global 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns. Drawing on the cultural criminology of Presdee (2000, 2004), this study identifies both postmodern and carnivalesque elements in the intertextual *Tiger King* universe, which includes *Tiger King* (2020), *Tiger King 2* (2021) and *Joe vs Carole* (2022). This article also includes discussion of new media, user-generated, parodying TikTok videos, and other creative (anti)fan responses, inspired by *Tiger King* celebrities and big-cat owners, Joe Exotic and Carole Baskin. Through close reading of multiple *Tiger King* texts, this analysis reveals representations imbued with class ideology and misogyny, beneath the dark humour and (un)pleasures derived from “hate-watching” rival true crime celebrities, in a dystopian, post-pandemic socio-cultural context.

Keywords: *Tiger King*; Carnival; Crime; murder-media; Netflix; TikTok; Joe Exotic; Carole Baskin

Introduction

Although true crime journalism, such as the podcast *Serial* (2014) and the television show *Making a Murderer* (2016), had already significantly impacted criminal justice systems and perceptions (Boling, 2019), few popular cultural phenomena captured the digital imaginary of COVID-19 lockdowns quite like the American Netflix television documentary series, *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness*, released March 2020. Moreover, the production, consumption and sharing of *Tiger King* themed content, across both streaming television and new media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, presents a compelling case study of the contemporary carnivalesque aesthetics and pleasures derived from new murder media entertainment. As Presdee (2000, 2004) and Presdee & Carver (2001) have suggested, the postmodern “carnival of crime” is best understood within a theoretical framework of cultural criminology, which recognises relationships between emotions and crime, including the transgressive excitements and seductions of hate, violence and disorder. Moreover, in a postmodern and somewhat dystopian sociocultural and historical moment, meanings of crime, and who is a criminal, are typically twisted, modified and commodified across multiple, contradictory narratives and lived experiences (Presdee, 2004). In the post-pandemic, new media age, self-consciously scandalising and shocking televisual texts, such as *Tiger King* (2020), *Tiger King 2* (2021) and *Joe vs Carole* (2022), not only speak to postmodern true crime audiences, “somewhat desensitized by image and information overload” (Hopkins, 1995, p. 15), they also knowingly invoke carnival as “performed acts of excess and excitement” (Presdee & Carver, 2001, p. 33) on social media platforms. While audience engagement with *Tiger King* related memes, YouTube videos and TikTok dance challenges seemed to amplify collaborative celebrification of the stars of the *Tiger King* televisual universe, these same *Tiger King* celebrities also seemed to lose control of their image and narrative in subsequent new media (mis)information about real or imagined criminal incidents. As we shall see, in the excessive and bizarre true crime narratives, and larger than life personalities of these *Tiger King* texts, class and gender tensions as well as violent crimes are repackaged as carnivalesque entertainment for expanding murder-media audiences.

In some sense, the subterranean story of *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* is the chaotic, multi-mediated spectacle of two Big Cat owners and aspiring media personalities, Joe Exotic and Carole Baskin, drawn into an unpredictable, (new) media maelstrom of hearsay, accusations, trial by media and, eventually, murder for hire. The most recent *Tiger King* themed television series, the scripted drama *Joe vs Carole* (2022), currently streaming on Peacock, apparently aims to generate more true crime revenue by turning a somewhat more sympathetic lens and audience focus to the life story of Carole Baskin, both before and after she encountered Joe Exotic. An adaptation of the Wondery podcast, *Joe vs Carole* was thus promoted with the tag line “the story you know was only half the tale,” as it promised to expose Carole’s “checkered” past. Despite apparently signing onto the original *Tiger King* documentary reality television series as a kind of self-styled spokesperson for big cat care and conservation, in the aggressive new social media environment, Carole Baskin seemed to quickly lose control of the (re)definition of her celebrity persona online. The social media sites which grew out of the original *Tiger King* series during 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns enabled fans and anti-fans to create and share stories which may or may not be tested as factual while intentionally or unintentionally mocking or misrepresenting those accused persons caught up in the true crime entertainment narratives. As Prins (2020) has suggested, in the age of new media, celebrities (and aspiring celebrities) generally, “have to grapple with this lack of control as audiences explore the digital possibilities offered to them” (p. 146). As an unconventional and hyper-visible woman in the series, who did not fit into the hegemonic ideal of celebrity femininity, Carole Baskin for example, was soon mocked and made over as a ubiquitous figure of fun in user-generated content within meme cultures and new media platforms such as TikTok.

The male protagonist of the show, Joseph Maldonado-Passage, better known as “Joe Exotic” and described in the series as a “gay, gun-toting cowboy with a mullet” or “Donald Trump on meth,” also lost control

of his rising star text and ended up (like his hero Trump) a kind of charismatic martyr of (white, male) train wreck celebrity and spectacle politics. This study of these (fallen) stars, and its method of critical media studies analysis, thus offers a case study of televisual celebrity presented as (failed) aspirational entrepreneur-activist, ripe for “hate-watching” (see also Negra, 2016). With its performative threats of murder, shooting guns, unhinged hate rants, charismatic tricksters and toxic white male identity politics (reimagined as rebellious, red-blooded American “freedom”), *Tiger King* television can be read as a kind of nihilistic celebration of the mediated theatre of (post)Trumpian apocalypse. The saturation of *Tiger King* texts with accusations and depictions of criminality, gratuitous violence and grotesque characters in an apparently dysfunctional and brutalized underclass, is a celebration of the carnival of crime *par excellence* (see also Presdee, 2004; Presdee & Carver, 2001). Essentially based on one long and bitter battle between protagonist zookeeper Joe Exotic and his nemesis Big Cat conservationist Carole Baskin, the series is also a kind of cartoonish microcosm of larger, divisive, mediated American politics of hate and projection – specifically, feelings of resentment and anger that are projected onto the figure of a hated and blamed female character.

Why Tiger King?

Arguably, no popular culture commodity better captures the anger, attitudes and anxieties of the Trump era, and its (failed) huckster American dream, than *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness*, and the countless fan generated memes and videos the series inspired via online commentary, interactivity and sociality. The seven-episode Netflix documentary or reality television true crime text about American big cat trainer Joe Exotic and his nemesis or hate object, big cat activist Carole Baskin, attracted over 34 million U.S viewers in the first ten days after its release making it, “the runaway hit of the global pandemic” and “the subject of endless commentary on social media” (Palmeri & Shaw, 2020). It is not just that the “jaw-dropping,” “binge-watched” series “managed to temporarily distract a stressed out world” (*Woman’s Day*, 2020), or “captivated viewers in the millions” with its “murder-for-hire story-lines” and “details of cult-like polyamorous domestic arrangements” (Theroux, 2020). *Tiger King* also stimulated emerging forms of “bottom up” media production, compulsive consumption rituals and TV streaming sociality, in response to the historical, pandemic socio-cultural moment. As Ando and Redmond (2020) have observed, digital media has not only facilitated a more active and participatory role for media audiences as co-creators who “stage their own performances” (p. 2) in response, it has also created a “new media ecosystem” (p. 2) which both celebrates and desecrates its virtually instantaneous celebrities online.

Collective and creative responses to the series included, for example, the transmedia, (anti)fan engagement with *Tiger King* televisual texts across the “Tiger King Dance Challenge” trend which went “viral” on the global TikTok social media platform in April 2020. This popular social media lockdown trend involved fan video creators performing and posting ritualised, comic, dance routines to amateur, satirical, rap lyrics accusing the femme fatale of the stranger-than-fiction documentary, Carole Baskin, of supposedly feeding her husband to the tigers. In the process, the Netflix series, and the countless amateur TikTok video parodies it inspired, have taken contemporary mediascape representations of the comic, carnivalesque and grotesque within true crime genres to new extremes, which deserve more in-depth critical commentary, in the era of media convergence. As we shall see, the *Tiger King* phenomenon demonstrated that within new media modes of pandemic popular culture, critical commentary on class, gender and the politics of representation is more relevant and necessary than ever, in the grotesque spectacles of reality “Trumpian apocalyptic TV” (Ewen, 2020, p. 574). With the exponential growth of this new media ecosystem, it is perhaps not surprising that Macquarie Dictionary chose as *the* word of 2020, “Doomscrolling,” or the common practice of continuing to compulsively read through endless negative news online, even though you know it is sensationalist, senseless and probably bad for your own mental health. It is perhaps a small step from doomscrolling to similar media consumption rituals of binge hate-watching, or continuing to compulsively watch a television show while also “hating on” its provocative characters – an

interactive trend which undoubtedly fed into the phenomenal visibility of *Tiger King* on both mainstream and social media during the 2020 Coronavirus crisis lockdown.

Theory and Methods

The theoretical and methodological starting point for this paper is the domain of a cultural criminology, which places the study of crime in the wider context of popular culture, and its socio-cultural constructs. This is important work as the cultural construction and portrayal of criminality may influence public perceptions of offenders and criminal justice policies (Call, 2021). Specifically, this paper draws on the work of cultural criminologist Mike Presdee (2000, 2004), who in turn built on the classic work of Bakhtin (1941) in *Rabelais and his World*, to explore contemporary crime through the lens of Carnival and its perverse pleasures of excess and transgression. Presdee and Carver (2001) also imagine Carnival as both a performed event and a critical discourse which activates the transgressive seductions of boundary pushing beyond what is traditionally regarded as acceptable and tasteful according to the values of the ruling and middle classes. This paper deliberately engages with this boundary pushing in order to understand the spectacular success of *Tiger King* (inter)texts across multiple audience readings and responses in contemporary (new) media and participatory popular culture.

Also building on theories of postmodernity (Harvey, 1990; Jameson, 1984), and its applications to popular culture (Kellner, 1995; Hopkins, 1995), Presdee and Carver (2001) identify an acceleration of postmodern elements in popular cultural representations of crime. This is particularly evident, they argue, in the carnival laughter and transgressions of both mainstream reality television and related internet sites, which give audiences license to play with the very notion of truth, while hating and humiliating targeted Others for entertainment (Presdee & Carver, 2001). Certainly, part of the pleasure on offer in *Tiger King* fandom is in assuming an ironic postmodern viewing position which embraces parody over reality, as audiences are encouraged to play with unresolved questions of who is guilty of what crime. Following Presdee and Carver (2001), this paper thus aims to illuminate some of the affective elements of *Tiger King* fandom and anti-fandom, including investigating how “hate-watching” televisual pleasures produced creative social media responses. Undoubtedly, the concept of “carnival” is useful in understanding the emotional world of the *Tiger King* characters also. We learn in the series, for example, that Joe Exotic extended his roadside zoo by creating his own literal, travelling carnival, by dragging his captive animals around to various small town American shopping malls and fairgrounds (see also Cimino, 2020). Indeed, part of the comic tragedy of the Joe Exotic life story is his apparent almost total immersion in the other world of carnival irrationality meets user-generated celebrification. This is evident for example in his long history of uploaded outrageous “Joe Exotic TV” YouTube videos, which the *Tiger King* documentaries subsequently recycled and made infamous. We learn also in the series that most of the staff at the roadside zoo run by Joe Exotic are also apparently outsiders, recovering alcoholics or formerly incarcerated persons (see also Cimino, 2020). As we shall see, a sense of underclass alienation and desperation pervades the parody of showmanship and entrepreneurialism that is the Joe Exotic carnival, particularly as he is eventually dragged into the very real, slightly more rational world of the American criminal justice system.

This study also follows Presdee (2000, 2004) in his somewhat sociological focus on crime, punishment and class structure, including down to the pains, anxieties and humiliations of everyday, underclass experiences in the post-welfarist, neoliberal state. Hence, this close textual analysis of the representations of deviancy, crime and conspiracy evident across the original documentary series *Tiger King* (2020), its five-part sequel *Tiger King 2* (2021) and the drama *Joe vs Carole* (2022), is also a study of interwoven class and gender inequalities and how they are negotiated in both online fictions and “real” life cultural responses. For what remains relatively under-theorised, in accounts of the carnival of crime, is how these deliberately defiant provocations and transgressions might intersect with misogynistic trolling cultures in our increasingly online social world. The perhaps hurtful and even hateful feedback certain celebrities and aspiring celebrities receive in contemporary new media

participatory popular culture is perhaps most acutely classed and gendered in the intersection of entertainment media and true crime.

In order to understand, therefore, the (mis)representation of the Carole Baskin character in the *Tiger King* media landscape, this paper also engages with critical, feminist theories on the media construction of femininity in true crime texts. Indeed, *Tiger King* and its hybrid (inter)texts present perhaps the most timely case study of that “narrative between apocalypse and carnival” which feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva (1982, p. 141) anticipated and which Barbara Creed (1993) later developed into the feminist theoretical framework of the mythological monstrous-feminine (see also Hopkins, 2018). Criminologist Yvonne Jewkes (2015) also applied the monstrous-feminine concept to tabloid modern media representations of female criminality, in her attempt to understand how and why true crime audiences are so horrified yet fascinated by the media (mis)representation of (alleged) female murderers. As we shall see, the performative hostility, ridicule and suspicion directed at the unlikely female (anti)heroine of *Tiger King*, Carole Baskin, presents a new transmedia retelling of old stereotypes of women as untrustworthy, scheming, liars in (intertextual and interactive) responses to binge hate-watching. Hence, while offering new forms, impact and reach for media convergence bingeing, the *Tiger King* universe still relies on old sexist and ageist tropes or punitive discourses of (failed or flawed) femininity as “Other” – unruly, ridiculous, manipulative and sinister. Moreover, this is not just the usual aggressive, mocking or hateful humour online which disproportionately targets women – especially (flower-wearing) middle-aged women (see also Sunden & Paasonen, 2018). It recalls, rather, an entire (keyboard) warrior worldview or Trumpian ethos which Chemaly (2018) identified as the “carnival of misogyny” (p. 236), played out particularly in the televised presidential debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The kind of conspiracy framings, threat comedy, irrational anger and malignant misogyny circulating online around *Tiger King* celebrity Carole Baskin recalls the extremes of alt-right conspiracy theorists disseminating and embellishing misinformation about Hillary Clinton on social media platforms during the 2016 American presidential election. Similarly, the old “lock her up” Trumpian rally cry echoes down through new types of reality television and media murder which seem to take a perverse pleasure in punishing scapegoated women as a form of participatory entertainment.

Analysis

Villains, Victims and Affective Economies of Hate

In the *Tiger King* universe, the figure of Carole Baskin apparently came to embody for Joe Exotic, fears of loss (loss of his status, money, property and tigers) feeding into his fantasies of revenge over a (more powerful) woman. This is a familiar narrative. For, as Ahmed (2015) has observed, in the affective economies of hate in white heteropatriarchy, the female Other may be too easily transformed into *the* object of hate, as all negative feelings are projected onto her by the male subject. As Kellner (2008) explained, aggressive manifestations of hyper-masculinity proliferate through contemporary forms of white male identity politics, particularly where the dispossessed white male subject sees himself as besieged or foreclosed upon by undeserving “Others.” Chemaly (2018) has also identified how Trump’s “Othering” of women dismisses their bodies, blood and behaviour as “disgusting” and repulsive – thus he constructs imaginary villains he invites his followers to target and hate. As Skeggs (2005) has observed: “Disgust is one of the affective responses to monstrosity” (p. 970) within reality TV also, where the target of the “tasteless” woman, who has failed to display her femininity properly, provides the “soft porn grotesque” (p. 970) for the viewers’ hate-watching pleasures. Gleeful, mocking disgust (activated by classed and/or gendered judgement) certainly seemed to be one of the driving (un)pleasures of *Tiger King*, not only as expressed and incited in program storylines, dialogue and framings, but in the viral, transmedia audience responses circulated on Twitter, Instagram and TikTok.

Performatively reimagined by online (anti)fans as feminine “Other” of the *Tiger King* drama, Carole Baskin quickly emerged as *the* popular hate object of *Tiger King* hate-watching. In 2020, #CaroleBaskin had 246 million views on TikTok alone, and has inspired countless, other negative “Did Carole kill her husband” social media videos and memes which (re)frame the character as comic, ridiculous, corrupt, sinister or dangerous. Of course, this kind of (anti)fan, postmodern reading(s) of reality entertainment also relies on embracing the whole self-consciously ridiculous spectacle with an ironic, detached yet immersed sensibility. Moreover, the recent *Tiger King* TikTok trends also illustrate the kind of cultural convergence which Henry Jenkins (2006) anticipated, wherein do-it-yourself and corporate media collide, as fan creators play a more active role in co-producing both transgressive and oppressive content and meanings. As Kellner (2008) sees it, however, the “new domain of the interactive spectacle” (p. 4), presents only the surface illusion of creativity, while drawing users deeper into existing divisions of gender, race and class. Certainly, much of the entertainment value of *Tiger King*, especially as it is expressed on social media, relies on heaping ridicule on the already relatively powerless, as it follows Joe Exotic in his increasingly desperate attempts to reinvent himself as an internet and reality television star, while relentlessly smearing the reputation of his female hate object Carole Baskin.

The whole comic-tragic and classed, “hillbilly” epic of *Tiger King’s* Joe Exotic embodied the (even) darker underside of Donald Trump’s neoliberal American dream and its (failed) promise of social mobility through reality celebrity or charismatic promotionalism (see also Negra, 2016). *Tiger King* iconography and discourse seemed to also capture the darkly comic chaos of the times, if not the ultimate, simulated Trumpian apocalypse. As Joe Exotic himself would famously put it, “We’re not done blowing shit up today.” The Exotic performative fetish for guns, explosions, wild animals and compensatory violence is not only a celebration of an angry, “berserk warrior” ethos, it reveals a wider white male identity politics which combines pre-modern symbolism with postmodern tools and tabloid media cultures (see also Kellner, 2008). It reflects an increasingly influential toxic (sub)culture which remains relevant beyond the *Tiger King* universe – witness 2021 iconography of violent, bare-chested, war-painted Trump supporters (one standout figure famously wearing fur and horned headgear) storming the U.S Capitol, some smashing the cameras of the mainstream media and almost all taking or posting souvenir selfies on social media. Certainly, for *Tiger King*, wild animals, weapons and other (pre-modern) symbols of male power are its (virtual) stock and trade. In a sense, the whole *Tiger King* immersive experience promises its television viewers and video creators, its fans and anti-fans, its Instagrammers and TikTokers, their own fun “freak-out zone” of characters, costumes and catchphrases as a way of dealing with the wider common experience of anxiety, frustration and disorientation in the post-pandemic age. Unfortunately perhaps, for the real people featured in the Netflix documentary, part of the perverse fun or “unpleasures” of the text(s), included a relentless “hating on” the characters, through a parodic humour which reflects class and gender inequalities (see also Ong & Negra, 2020) and a morbid fascination with “murder and mayhem” entertainment.

“Ripping People’s Arms off”: Murder-Media and its Gruesome Guilty Pleasures

Although there are virtually countless televisual representations of true crime currently available for binge watching, the American streaming service Netflix had already established the wide-ranging impact and popular appeal of its murder-media offerings with the 2015 documentary series *Making a Murderer*. The phenomenal success of *Making a Murderer* in both attracting and engaging audiences resulted in online public petitions to free the incarcerated Steven Avery and public pressure to reopen the case of the murder of Teresa Halbach. The transmedia coverage and attention generated from *Tiger King* has also had real criminal justice system consequences for the larger than life, real life characters it represents, although with somewhat less liberating outcomes. The leading man of *Tiger King*, Joe Exotic, “a mulleted, gun-toting polygamist and country western singer who presides over an Oklahoma roadside zoo” (Netflix, 2020) is currently incarcerated for plotting to kill Carole Baskin, while the investigation into the 1996 disappearance of Carole Baskin’s millionaire husband was

also reopened. Filmed in a state with one of the highest incarceration rates, within a country notorious for mass imprisonment, the threat of prison plays like an ominous soundtrack throughout the *Tiger King* documentary drama, in scenes that smack of (classed) desolation, fear and failure. At the same time, the editing, promotion and framing of the series mostly seems to strip its characters of sympathetic characteristics and present them as figures of fun that a “knowing” postmodern audience might love to hate. While an undercurrent of systemic class pain, inequality and exploitation occasionally pushes to the surface in some *Tiger King* scenes (when a Zoo worker loses his arm in a workplace accident for example), it is never fully explored or explained – rather presented as gruesome spectacle. Moreover, while the titillating mix of true crime, death threats and reality TV drama set against rural decay in neoliberal America is certainly ramped up in *Tiger King*, there is little serious attempt to explain the causes and effects of the economic insecurity and apparent emotional dysfunction of some of its over-the-top characters. Instead, in such sensationalist, tabloid murder-media offerings, viewers are offered the spectacle of out-of-control “freaks” resorting to (alleged or attempted) murder to realise their frustrated ambitions (or die trying). Despite being sentenced to twenty two years in prison at the Grady County Jail in Oklahoma, however, Joe Exotic remains a kind of celebrity cult figure, due to the global multi-media attention he has received (see Cimino, 2020). Social media is implicated, in both formal and informal ways, in multi-mediated *Tiger King* true crime meanings and mythology. Moreover, among the virtually countless #TigerKing Twitter and Instagram updates and memes is a March 2020 Twitter post from the real life Florida Sheriff investigating the missing husband cold case stating, “Since @netflix and #Covid19 #Quarantine has made #TigerKing all the rage, I figured it was a good time to ask for new leads.” At the time of writing, however, allegations against Carole Baskin remain unsubstantiated.

Such developments suggest the (post)modern *Tiger King* spectacles, like the *Making a Murderer* series before, demonstrate not just novel relationships between truth and fiction, creator and consumer, but also new relationships between (new) media and violent crime. While part of the thrill of reality TV has long been in its classist depictions of “white trash” as “beyond governance” (see Skeggs, 2005, p. 965), binge-watching murder-media across multiple platforms also apparently now exploits public desires to mock, pursue and punish (alleged) criminals as part of the whole immersive crime as entertainment experience. As Presdee (2000) suggests, cultural criminology must now come to grips with a contemporary popular culture which shamelessly repackages potential harm and hate as “fun”, morbid fascination in the realm of carnival.

Tiger King presents not only a carnivalesque approach to crime, but a wildly theatrical and performative cast of carnivalesque characters which recalls Douglas Kellner’s (1995) “postmodern identities” (p. 30) centred on media images and consumer culture, pulling from and playing to the “postmodern carnival” (p. 30). Hence, the flamboyant star of the show, big cat zoo owner, Joe Exotic, is a charismatic performer-creator of his own self-aware media image constructions. *Tiger King* stars have (presumably deliberately) launched thousands of internet memes and video parodies with their eccentric self-presentations, tiger-themed costumes and soundbite catchphrases. Much of the dark intertextual humour derived from the series however, rests on the apparent failure of Joe Exotic and others to transition successfully from reality TV oddity to legitimate, “respectable” celebrity expert, in their displays of (gendered) identity and (public) likeability. As the website *Mama’s Geeky* and its collection of the “best Netflix *Tiger King* memes” puts it, the TV series is not only seven hours of “binge-worthy” viewing while quarantined at home, it is, “like a trainwreck that you just cannot look away from.” Hence, the compulsive (un)pleasures of viewing this kind of murder-media, shock-reality television apparently lie in picking over the chaos and decay of the almost apocalyptic, (post)Trumpian landscape and the characters who must fight their way through it. Although few characters in the series are presented as particularly likeable, Carole Baskin emerges in the predictable role of the dubious middle-aged woman, on the basis of the unproven allegation (made by Joe Exotic) that her (comparative) wealth derives supposedly from the murder of her husband. Both central characters, however, have had their reality celebrity narratives rewritten in ways they presumably did not

anticipate when signing on for a documentary about captive tigers, within wider entertainment industries entirely transformed by new media interactivity.

In one memorable trainwreck TV scene, Joe Exotic is attacked by his own big cat “pets,” but his staff do not intervene and continue to film because they assume it is all just part of the show (which, perhaps, in a way, it is). The humiliated and enraged Joe Exotic threatens to shoot the animal as he is dragged around helplessly by the foot, screaming: “I’m gonna shoot you right between the f***** eyes, b**ch!” Cruelty and compensatory violence is indeed part of the currency of a (Trumpian) late Capitalist *Tiger King* universe. Moreover, the way that postmodern audiences have learned to enjoy this spectacle of violence and humiliation in some true crime genres must be examined, especially where it criminalises and demonises already marginalised groups (Presdee, 2000).

Helpfully, for the makers of *Tiger King* the series, Joe Exotic had already been recording his most shocking behaviours and uploading them to the internet under what he termed “Joe Exotic TV.” Presenting himself as a kind of grotesque self-made showman, Exotic had uploaded visual spectacles of DIY violence and destruction designed to titillate fans. Joe Exotic also threatens to shoot Carole Baskin throughout the series in even more bizarre shock provocations and (unsupported) televised allegations: “I consider that b**ch to be one of the biggest terrorists in the Exotic animal world!” In such unhinged rants, Joe Exotic is apparently expressing the kind of obsessive hate which, as Ahmed (2015) has explained in her study of the cultural politics of emotion, is actually a form of attachment – an obsession with the despised Other (who is threatening to take something away from the white male subject) which will just not let go. Much of the show’s culture-slumming (un)pleasure, apparently derives from witnessing uneducated, “white trash” characters imagining themselves as (hyper)masculine and (hyper)sexual men of the world. Joe Exotic is clearly positioned here, however, for a “knowing” audience as the backward, “Hillbilly” stereotype that liberal cosmopolitanism forgot and global capitalism left behind. Despite Joe Exotic explicitly investing in the promises of Trumpism, the reality television audience is in on the sick “joke” that he will never realise those “great,” “huge,” American dreams, due to his economic and cultural class position. On the other hand, we are never quite sure in the watching, whether Joe Exotic really believes all of his own hyperbolic defiant bluster, or whether he is only inventing this unashamedly offensive persona to meet a superficial, apocalyptic culture on its own lurid, nihilistic terms (see also Hopkins, 1995).

Tiger Wild: Big Cats, Big Dreams and Reality Celebrity Fails

Big Cats, especially Tigers, are frequently deployed as props and symbols of masculine power and unfettered sexuality within the *Tiger King* representational mix. The official *Tiger King* Netflix promotional image features Joe Exotic, wearing a particularly garish, green leopard print shirt, posing with his arm around one of his “pet” tigers. The iconic image seemed to capture the 2020 zeitgeist (one social media meme repurposed the image with the caption, “the perfect apocalypse get up”) and was parodied online and IRL (in real life). *Tiger King* 2020 Halloween costumes, complete with fake, furry, orange tiger ears, mullet shaped Joe Exotic wig and green leopard print outfit, sold out as (geographically) far away as Australia. The global Netflix *Tiger King* website iconography takes the human-animal hybrid theme further, with a bright orange line drawing of the face of Joe Exotic literally disappearing into a swirling collage of roaring Tigers. As Negra (2018) suggests, such obsession with cats, or more specifically with animal-centred entrepreneurialism, may be a dramatic marker of the times, representing an “underlying pessimism about human interrelatedness in neoliberal culture” (p. 8). Certainly, all the key players in the *Tiger King* drama profess to love and care deeply for their animals, while the human relationships seem to centre on conflict, competition, hatred or mutual exploitation.

Joe Exotic also embodies a kind of underclass expression of our culture’s collective obsession with media stardom, or its desperate underside, when the fantasy fails (as for most, it must). Before starring in *Tiger King*,

Joe Exotic had apparently tried (and failed at) most other routes to fast celebrity and social mobility in the age of media spectacle, from country music singer, to reality TV show host and even presidential candidate – following the new American dream (or nightmare) presidential narrative of Donald Trump. Through the Netflix series, and in his YouTube videos, Joe Exotic attempts to wrestle back his (failed) fantasy narrative of himself as a country and western music star on the rise: “This is my first album, ‘I Saw a Tiger’.” In other revealing (unintentional) humour, his co-stars compare the apparent drug fuelled (methamphetamine) desperation of their social milieu to the glamorous Hollywood cocaine gangster epic *Scarface*. Of course the classist humour derives from the apparent editing and rewriting of their “hillbilly” life stories and aspirations as inherently ridiculous. The moral lesson apparently conveyed by the dominant reading of the text(s) is that the rural white poor should not aspire to the American (capitalist) gangster dream of money and fame (at any price). They do, it seems, make perfect frustrated human fodder for reality TV in Trump’s America, wherein their underclass fantasies of fast socioeconomic mobility can be fed back and used against them. Meanwhile, the “real” Joe Exotic is no longer in any position to profit from global fame, sentenced to 22 years in an American prison for attempted murder for hire.

The Hijacking and Hate-watching of Celebrity Text Carole Baskin

Despite the fact that she has not been convicted or arrested, Carole Baskin is accused by characters in the TV series, and in some *Tiger King* themed comic memes and video social media (re)tellings, of murdering her missing millionaire husband and feeding his remains to her pet tigers. Baskin (cited in Cimino, 2020, p. 33) has pointed out that this is the “most ludicrous of all the lies.” Still, much of the true crime titillation of *Tiger King*, and its sequel and dramatizations, rested on threats and accusations of murder: the titillating true crime suggestion that Joe may murder Carole and that Carole (according to Joe) has allegedly murdered her missing husband. From a feminist media studies perspective, it is fascinating and disturbing to witness how Joe Exotic and his fans and (anti)fans have inserted themselves into and rewritten the narrative of Carole Baskin across multiple, intersecting new media texts in the guise of humour and parody. Joe Exotic even released his own amateurish country music ‘dis’ (disrespect) video (which has received over 9 million views on *YouTube*), titled “Here Kitty Kitty,” which features images of a Carole Baskin impersonator feeding scraps of raw meat (supposedly what is left of the dismembered husband) to captive tigers. In other misogynistic and grotesque scenes of the *Netflix* series, (also still popular on YouTube), Joe Exotic is filmed shooting a rubber blow-up doll in the head (which wears a Carole Baskin name tag), while issuing a frenzied stream of disparaging stories, comic insults, murder plots, conspiracy theories and death threats. These scenes are also revisited and ramped up for comic effect, in the more recent scripted *Joe vs Carole* television drama. While this was hardly the first time an unstable and obsessive man had been caught on film projecting and playing out his resentment, jealousy and hatred of women, what is new is the way this narrative has been picked up and played with by his audiences through social media memes and TikTok videos. In this particularly postmodern moment, TikToking *Tiger King* is its own kind of parody of reality TV, where (aspiring) social media micro-celebrities play (aspiring) reality television stars, in amateur videos engineered to share, shock and provoke. Social media memes and (anti)fan websites make it clear that hate-watching Carole Baskin is part of the interactive pleasure of watching *Tiger King*: “There’s murder, meth, magic, country music videos that are so bad they’re good, tigers ripping people’s arms off, gay polygamy, and, of course, that b**ch Carole Baskin” (*Shareably*, 2020).

The often gruesome and provocative *Tiger King* multi-mediated DIY images and narratives recall Bakhtin’s theorizing on the unashamed excess, comic spectacles and the vulgar grotesque connected with the other time-worlds of the popular carnivalesque. It also recalls the “issues of degradation, desecration and decelebrification” which are an increasingly dominant part of celebrity culture (Ando & Redmond, 2020, p. 1). Another memorable and widely shared *Tiger King* meme, for example, places the caption “last known photo of

Carole Baskin's husband" above a picture of a captive tiger defecating (cited in *Mama's Geeky*, 2020). It seems that when Joe Exotic rants obsessively about Carole Baskin, he is also channelling the misogynistic forces, moral obsessions and prejudices of our wider culture, which has long (mis)represented women (especially strong, older women) as dangerous, manipulative or deceptive. Moreover, even in the interactive, parodic "fun house of mirrors" (Kellner, 1995, p. 237) that makes up postmodern new media culture, old misogynistic myths remain.

Dancing Through the Trumpian Apocalypse: The TikTok Tiger King Dance Challenge

During the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, satirical *Tiger King* themed memes also morphed into a viral TikTok *Tiger King* trending video, which went viral as a dance challenge, when TikTok user-creator Caleb Jaxin uploaded a video of himself rapping, dancing and dressed as Joe Exotic. His tune was sampled from the hypnotic song "Savage" by Megan Thee Stallion, but the lyrics were changed and delivered with an exaggerated Southern American accent apparently impersonating Joe Exotic: "Carole Baskin; killed her husband, whacked him; can't convince me that it didn't happen; fed him to tigers, they snackin'; what's happening; Carole Baskin" (Jaxin, 2020). As previously mentioned, the Joe Exotic claims against Carole Baskin and her big cats, remain unsubstantiated. Yet, thousands of short (60 second) amateur or user-generated TikTok *Tiger King* dance videos, were (re)created and shared in 2020, further amplifying *Tiger King* true crime mythologies, while playing up to and pulling from the "white trash" visual aesthetic and carnivalesque personae of *Tiger King* the Netflix series. The customary costumes or meme apparel for these amateur video TikTok dance parodies, reference the class-coded low-culture and tabloid characters of the *Netflix* series (with trucker caps, bleached blonde mullet haircuts, leopard print) and with household pets (cats or dogs) typically standing in for the tigers.

The parodic message of this comic satire is at least in part a reminder that the haircut, clothing, accent and speech of Joe Exotic is an immediately recognisable marker of his low status, underclass identity and "bad" taste. Instagrammers and TikTokers have also poked fun at the failed masculinity and apparent incompetence of Joe Exotic as a Big Cat trainer, through comic parodies, for example, which feature TikTok performers yelling Joe Exotic dialogue and catchphrases in Oklahoman ("Okie") accents ("I will shoot you! I'm gonna put a cap in your arse!") as they are dragged by the foot around suburban backyards by their pet dogs (standing in again for captive Tigers).

These viral TikTok trends also fed off the lockdown binge-watching experience, recognising and celebrating desires to turn the compulsive consumption of *Tiger King* (inter)texts into a kind of collective ritual. In part this was related to new modes of compulsive consumption, offered by the successful, "sticky" technology of the TikTok platform, which allows viewers to move compulsively across themed videos with a simple swipe of the smart phone. In part, it was also related to the "sticky" quality of the video music sample or "earworm" of the *Tiger King* TikTok dance challenge rap, which repeats endlessly in the mind, long after the smart phone is finally put down. Like much user-generated parody in the new media age, the parody became just as famous, "catchy" and memorable as the text that inspired it, and even more meme worthy than Joe Exotic's own darkly comic impersonations of Carole Baskin in his own amateur Joe TV YouTube parodies. Indeed, the viral *Tiger King* challenge TikTok trend sparked several other *Tiger King* TikTok sub-trends, including the "Don't say it, don't say it" trend of users attempting to self-soothe in more productive ways during lockdown, before giving in to the apparently all-consuming desire to repeat the carnivalesque "murder rap". It could be argued these intertextual, mock-involuntary, binge-watching habits were a way to deal with the isolation, absurdity and anxiety of the "real" and "stuck" (post)COVID-19 world, as a whole, new, other, techno-social world is available, on demand, to lose yourself within.

Other TikTok *Tiger King* parody videos, riff off or recreate Carole Baskin's own video diaries, mocking her made-for-TV catchphrases, her flamboyant clothing and footage of her riding her bicycle around her big cat sanctuary. Indeed, for a time during 2020 lockdown, the ubiquitous Baskin catchphrase ("hey all you cool cats

and kittens”) became a kind of “knowing” (sub)cultural social glue greeting among *Tiger King* fans – a common language of (social) media culture which spoke to a way of being both connected to and detached from the strangeness of the “real” post-pandemic world. Yet the satirical humour of these user-generated Carole Baskin parody videos also apparently rests on the ageist and sexist ideological assumption that women of a certain age should supposedly not in “good” taste dress in colourful Leopard print clothing, wear floral headbands or be recorded riding around on push bikes. This gendered, darkly comic critiquing of Carole Baskin has also been picked up by mainstream, legacy, print newspaper journalists: “there is something not quite right about someone who makes a living out of providing room and board for a relatively small number of rescued animals, while wearing flower-child accoutrements in late middle age” (Theroux, 2020, p. 27). The apparent “weirdness” of such iconic scenes from the original *Tiger King* (2020) documentary were also picked up and played upon in the more recent *Joe vs Carole* (2022) scripted television drama, which offered fans and anti-fans the added value of Carole’s supposed “origin story.” *Tiger King* murder media mythology has taken on an intertextual life of its own. It is easy to forget, in the chaotic, mediated merging of fact and fiction, that Carole Baskin was not actually the villain of the *Tiger King* story, she had rather used legal means to prevent the maltreatment of animals in a deplorable roadside zoo run by Joe Exotic. Yet in the postmodern media landscape, wherein image has overtaken reality, Baskin will perhaps always be unfairly blamed for something – in the latest ridiculous twist, Joe’s husband has even accused Carole of causing the COVID-19 pandemic (Cimino, 2020).

For her part, Baskin, in her own recent video statements, seems to be constantly too late in attempting to take back control of her own narrative, struggling to (re)frame herself not as carnivalesque persona of tabloid TV but as a legitimate media personality and serious animal activist. Presumably she, like Joe Exotic, has not exactly benefited from the slippery processes of new media reality celebrification, as she might have hoped. She has, however, reprised her reality celebrity to some extent, with a recent showing on American *Dancing with the Stars* (in vivid pink animal print costume of course) – an appearance that seemed to spark a new round of mocking, Internet memes. It is perhaps hardly surprising that Carole Baskin apparently refused to participate in the *Tiger King 2* (2021) sequel which seems to rely mostly on YouTube clips and interviews with Joe Exotic fans, foes and alleged co-conspirators.

Conclusion

This close, textual analysis of intersecting *Tiger King* texts has argued that performative (anti)fan mocking, scapegoating and other hate expressions are part of the postmodern pleasures of the contemporary true crime carnivalesque and thus need to be taken seriously. This ironic, “hate-watching” *Tiger King* fandom and anti-fandom has both classed and gendered dimensions. It ought to be remembered, however, that this multi-media circus, this postmodern realm of carnivalesque images and illusions has some real consequences for real people, particularly those accused of a violent crime. It should also be noted that Big Cat conservationist Carole Baskin has always denied killing her second husband, who was declared dead in 2002. With the recent release of *Joe vs Carole* (2022), however, the *Tiger King* carnival rolls on.

Perhaps most concerning for other animal activists, the rogue exotic zoo at the centre of *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness*, is at the time of writing still open, with fans of the reality television series able to visit in “real” life and post their own souvenir selfies online. Hence, the primitive and grotesque spectacle of wild animals exploited for profit and entertainment continues to suggest a kind of postmodern, medieval carnival on loop, in a multi-mediated cultural circus even Bakhtin could not have anticipated. I have argued that the *Tiger King* imaginary is in a sense both premodern and postmodern – barbaric, brutalised, but also ultimately of the post-pandemic media moment.

I have also argued that despite, or perhaps because of, its viral and compulsive, comic and creative TikTok trends, the media saturation and infatuation with *Tiger King* parodic (un)pleasures is imbued with intersecting

class ideology and misogyny which portrays underclass tastes and practices as ridiculous and grotesque. I return finally to Kristeva's (1982) philosophical insights, that the abject embodies and activates deep (gendered) fears and anxieties, and thus can be both horrific and humorous, fascinating and disgusting at the same time. In a sense, this explains also the intertwined attraction and repulsion of postmodern binge hate-watching – the spectator is shocked and disgusted but somehow just can't stop watching. As Ahmed (2015) explained, the internet has also become the exceptionally powerful means by which we watch, and call upon others to watch our own, "performativity of disgust" (p. 95); through the use of mocking humiliation and ridicule, subjects distance themselves from Others perceived as strange, contaminating or ridiculous. Beneath all the carnival laughter, however, many hegemonic assumptions about gender, age and class remain, as the (new) media treatment of reality celebrities Joe Exotic and Carole Baskin seems to suggest. In the infamous postmodern mediated hall of mirrors, there is no "outside" to this process and crisis – there is only more parody, more exploitation. For if ever there was any doubt we are lost deep in the looping mix of carnivalesque true crime, surely *Tiger King* surpasses it, in all its guilty and grotesque pleasures, in all its digital media forms.

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