

## Article

# “Horsin’ Around”? #MeToo, the Sadcom, and *BoJack Horseman*

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**Abstract:** The animated series *BoJack Horseman* has garnered much critical acclaim for its mix of tragic and comic portrayals of its eponymous protagonist, washed-up actor and cynic BoJack, and his friends in the anthropomorphic Hollywood setting. The term “sadcom” has been applied to *BoJack* and other series that operate on similar premises—an interesting response to larger critical investigations of the intersections of tragic and comic modes of humor that find expression, for example, in the awkward and in cringe. This article investigates how this mixture comes to bear in season 5 of the series from 2018, which deals with several topics related to the #MeToo movement. Through several formal elements as well as plotlines that lay bare superficial performances and complicitness in a sexist system, the season supports notions of authenticity and solidarity that lie the heart of sadcoms, which invites closer inspection not just of *BoJack Horseman* but the genre as a whole.

**Keywords:** *BoJack Horseman*; #MeToo; sadcom; awkward; cringe; humor; solidarity

## 1. Introduction

There is an obvious reading of Netflix’s hit show *BoJack Horseman* (2014–2020), which is perhaps best encapsulated by the show’s ending credits song provided by the band Grouplove: “Back in the ‘90s, I was in a very famous TV show/[...] And I’m trying to hold on to my past/It’s been so long/I don’t think I’m gonna last” (Grouplove 2017). Here, protagonist BoJack Horseman, a rundown, alcoholic, post-peak narcissist, is both nostalgic for and—as we shall see—haunted by his bygone success. In this context, BoJack’s portrayal also gives way to a wider critique of the shallow, oblivious, toxic and corrupted entertainment culture of Hollywood, the *BoJack* universe’s surreal equivalent to the Los Angeles neighborhood. And certainly, this reading is valid: The animated universe of Hollywood, in which anthropomorphic and human characters coexist, does not hide the fact that it is taking stock of a morally deviant West Coast bubble and its star-spangled epicenter.

At the same time, the show has garnered wide critical acclaim for its nuanced portrayal of this setting, broaching topics from addiction to mental health, dysfunctional families and relationships, (a)sexuality, and more. This article focuses on the penultimate season 5, released in September 2018, because it functions as a prime example of *BoJack Horseman* as what has been termed a “sadcom” (see below): The season combines the show’s signature style, which contains elements of light-hearted, silly, awkward, cringe, or morbid humor, with “serious” negotiations of sexual harassment, sexism, inequality, and the roles of women in the entertainment industry. These are core issues of the #MeToo movement that had flared up in October 2017 following the allegations against former Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein and quickly became a dominant topic of (social) media at the time. It has been noted that while season 5 might be seen as a direct response to this movement, its episodes had been planned before and independently of these social developments (see Framke 2018). Nonetheless, season 5 is particularly notable as it both meets a public need to grapple with real-life, individual, as well as institutionalized sexism and presents the events as organic to the protagonist’s story arc. Amanda Hess observes that of all the current examples of “#MeToo television [...] perhaps only *BoJack Horseman* feels as if it’s been preparing for this moment for the whole life of the show” (Hess 2018). In this



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sense, season 5 escalates BoJack's past behaviors and choices, which will result in his final reckoning in season 6.

Several plotlines in the fifth season center around forms of sexism, abuse, and the mechanisms that enable them as expressions of structural, gendered inequality. Through BoJack and his co-star Gina Cazador, especially, the season examines "how to measure and take part in accountability" for such realities (Dunst 2020). In addition, it probes the parameters of forgiveness (see Obaro 2020), albeit denying straight-forward redemption to either characters or audiences (see Joho 2018). The label of the "sadcom" (see Gilbert 2020; Jaffe 2015) is central to understanding how season 5 manages to navigate such complex issues. Its "emotional labor" (Duncan 2017, p. 1), I will show, results from the combination of funny, serious, awkward, and cringeworthy moments. This strategy ultimately creates a particular version of what Adam Kotsko calls the "social bond" of awkwardness (p. 9). This bond of shared, communal suffering (see Schwanebeck 2015, p. 107) does not simply remain on the diegetic level of the characters but extends to the audience, reminding both of their spectatorship, voyeurism, and potential complicity in women's suffering. In attempting to display and evoke authentic feelings and responses (such as empathy, repentance, shame, ...), the sadcom mode of season five suggests that they foster solidarity with targets of abuse, and thus ultimately create community. However, it does so by demonstrating that striving for authenticity must include a process of wrestling with its opposites, i.e., complicitness and inauthentic, superficial performances. What seems a paradoxical design at first glance allows us not just to investigate *BoJack Horseman* as a sadcom but also to inquire into the potential pitfalls of this genre.

## 2. Awkward, Cringe, Solidarity: *BoJack* as Sadcom

To begin, I want to consider some terminology that is helpful to illuminate the mechanisms at work in season 5 of *BoJack Horseman*. In particular, I want to think together modes of awkward and cringe humor with communal suffering in order to illustrate the recent classification of the show in popular media as a "sadcom" (in Gilbert 2020; Handlen 2015; Jaffe 2015). For Kotsko, awkwardness is a central concept in describing our relationship to other people: Recognizing and experiencing the awkward in situations is a "social phenomenon" (Kotsko 2010a, p. 7) because "[a]wkwardness is the feeling of discomfort or anxiety that accompanies a disruption in [and the violation or absence of] social norms" (Kotsko 2010b). This shared experience of discomfort results, for Kotsko, in "a weird kind of social bond" (Kotsko 2010a, p. 9). Furthermore, his claim that we currently live in an age of "cultural awkwardness" (Kotsko 2010a, p. 17)—following the so-called age of irony of the 1990s—is an apt context in which to consider season 5 of *BoJack Horseman*, because it, too, dwells in "the general malaise that accompanies a relatively weak [social] norm" (Kotsko 2010a, p. 17). The twelve episodes probe "a social order in decline [that struggles with] its ability to provide a convincing account of [how] to do things right" (Kotsko 2010a, p. 17). Season 5 takes place in a setting in such decline, Hollywood, where morals are dissolved and where "to do things right" often equals a performance of empty signifiers. This is illustrated by the characters' quests into who they are, what is real and true, or what is moral and just in addition to how the season exposes PR strategies and public media coverage that misuse and abuse, for example, feminism and feminist activism.

In her 2018 book *Cringeworthy* Melissa Dahl ponders the relationship between the awkward and cringe. She calls awkwardness an "alert system" of sorts: "If awkwardness sounds the alarm, cringing is what happens when it goes off. It's the intense visceral reaction produced by an awkward moment" (p. 8). Cringe here becomes the direct, visible manifestation of the experience of awkwardness. Her observation of the strong physical, "embodied" (Holm 2017, p. 92) component of cringe is especially relevant when watching season 5 of *BoJack Horseman* because it underlines that the show's often funny, satirical, hilarious tone does not exclude moments of awkwardness and cringe in rather "serious", unfunny situations. In such situations, the physical reaction of characters and audiences alike reveals a recognition of moral wrongdoing and a violation or breakdown of the

above-mentioned social norms. A prominent example is, for instance, BoJack's eulogy for his mother in "Free Churro" (Winfrey 2018a). Given the complicated relationship they shared, the eulogy is unconventional and full of awkward stories and moments that reflect BoJack's difficulty to come to terms with his mother. At the end of the episode, in a classic comedic twist, it is revealed that he has spoken at the wrong funeral.

If we understand *BoJack Horseman* very broadly as a humorous text (see Holm 2017), we can also consider its possible "emotional labor" through the use of cringe and awkward humor. In season 5, this work seems closely related to what Nicholas Holm calls "the negotiation, contestation and distribution of power" (p. 12). A key strategy through which humor of the awkward and the uncomfortable kind intervenes in this way is by invoking, in Holm's words, "the comic potential of suffering" (p. 91) for the audience. In a similar argument to Dahl and Kotsko, Holm explains that the audience is captured in a "direct engagement between the world of the text [or the show] and the[ir] lived experience" (p. 92). Holm calls this phenomenon "painful sympathy" (p. 91). These strategies are at play in season 5 of *BoJack Horseman*, not only because of the political dimensions of the #MeToo movement that we can trace in the show but also because of the power dynamics around women's rights that the season explores as a consequence. Two levels of "painful sympathy" are invoked here: On the diegetic level, characters are called upon to sympathize and share in the trauma of (sexual) harassment fellow characters are experiencing—such as Gina, for example—just as they are challenged to consider the positions vis-à-vis the perpetrators, such as BoJack. On the extradiegetic level, audiences are invited to react according to their nature as "empathetic beings" (Holm 2017, p. 93) and reflect on the representation of suffering and abuse. Through the various #MeToo-inspired plots in season 5, the show creates intersecting "communities of suffering" (see Schwanebeck 2015, p. 107) and demonstrates that "suffering" can occur both in dark as well as over-the-top exaggerated moments.

All considerations of awkward, cringe, and communal suffering eventually revolve around a shared acknowledgement of their productive social potential: Kotsko and Dahl agree that both awkwardness and "cringing [are] worthwhile feeling[s], [ . . . ] emotion[s] worth exploring, not avoiding" (Dahl 2019, p. 16). The social bond they foster does not merely rest on the fact of sharing in the awkward, the mutual dwelling in the fact that social norms have been tested or challenged. For Kotsko, the optimistic and inspiring potential of the awkward lies in its "lesson in solidarity", i.e., "the possibility of actually identifying with those that social orders seek to exclude" (Kotsko 2010b). Solidarity also is a key term for communities of suffering, as they are installed in moments in which their foundation in solidarity is dispensed with, which causes "discomfort and pain to [ . . . ] characters and audience alike" (Schwanebeck 2015, p. 111). Solidarity is crucial not just for the larger #MeToo movement but particularly in season 5 of *BoJack Horseman*. It tests and challenges, for example, our solidarity with women in the face of sexual harassment in the entertainment industry. It explores the collapse of solidarity with victims of sexual harassment, the collapse of solidarity among the women of Hollywood themselves, and asks not least, whether there can be solidarity with the protagonist BoJack, who has been testing this feeling in his fellow characters as well as audiences since the beginning of the show.

Categorizing *BoJack Horseman* as a "sadcom"—as recent reviews have done—seems a logical continuation of the theoretical considerations outlined so far. Zack Handlen classifies *BoJack* under a new, emerging genre, that of "animated series hiding a rich emotional life behind a thick layer of dark comedy and borderline nihilism" (Handlen 2015). He calls the characteristic tone of such shows "cynical sincerity" (Handlen 2015). Jenny Jaffe picks up Handlen's suggestions and introduces the term "sadcom". This choice first pays attention to format: We are not simply witnessing an instance of tragicomedy but are seeing shows that use the well-established format and genre of the (TV) sitcom and develop it further (see Gilbert 2020; Jaffe 2015). Second, the term calls attention to how the genre mediates the two poles. For Jaffe this ultimately allows such shows to use their "shocking, difficult, and heartbreaking [ . . . ] honesty [to] resound[ . . . ] deeply with

[their] audience" (Jaffe 2015). In Sophie Gilbert's words, the sadcom "make[s] you laugh not through pain but at it;" it uses the tension between these emotional states to create "moments that feel the most transcendently human" (Gilbert 2020).

Such preliminary definitions and assessments hark back to the key terms established above. First, the sadcom fosters a sense of community, both among its characters and with its audiences. It appeals to communities of suffering, but neither through merely "sincere escapism nor [purely] cynical nihilism" (Jaffe 2015). Instead, it engages with a wide variety of strong affects (discomfort, shame/ing, . . . ) that are transmitted through various forms of humor (awkward, cringe, . . . ). In turn, it values solidarity and remains invested in its protagonists as well as "the state of the world around them" (Gilbert 2020). Reviewers agree that the sadcom is therefore "honest" as well as "optimistic" (see Gilbert 2020; Handlen 2015; Jaffe 2015) because the genre's central message suggests that hardship can be overcome together if there is an authentic effort: "The world can be terrible, and so can we. [ . . . ] But we are trying our best. And there is something deeply optimistic in that" (Jaffe 2015). In other words, the "sadcom" helps us understand *BoJack's* affective charge: The show is funny in the portrayal of the often absurd turns of events in the lives of a washed-up actor and his friends, but it equally confronts serious questions, such as that posited by the protagonist: "How do you make something right when you've made it so wrong you can never go back?" (Long 2018a).

### 3. "A Sensational Season of [#MeToo] Television" (S5E1)

In season 5 of *BoJack Horseman*, issues of community, communal suffering, and authentic solidarity are brought to a head by exposing their perceived opposites, i.e., discord, complicitness, or performed solidarity, through the Hollywood version of #MeToo. (Parton 2018) The manner in which the season approaches sexism, abuse, power hierarchies, double standards, and more, in the entertainment industry can be told through two lenses, that of form and that of character.

Caroline Framke says of the penultimate season that "[i]t not only features Hollywood struggling to acknowledge its rotten, sexist practices, but confronts the fact that the show's mafin character—BoJack himself—has very often abused his power in exactly the way that inspired the #MeToo movement in the first place" (Framke 2018). This self-referential metalevel at play in season 5 is perhaps even stronger than in previous seasons. Here, this metalevel becomes particularly obvious through the mise-en-abyme theatrical frame that sees BoJack as the star of the TV show *Philbert*, a fictional crime noir that increasingly takes over his own, "real" life. The show-within-a-show marks the apt narrative frame for BoJack, who had his breakthrough on another TV show in the 1990s, the popular sitcom *Horsin' Around*, which is modeled after family shows such as *Full House*, their domestic bliss, and often "toxic" sentimentality (see Handlen 2015). For BoJack, *Horsin' Around* does not just lay the foundation for his stardom and wealth but also highlights his abusive relationship with younger fellow actresses through the figure of his co- and childstar Sarah Lynn.

BoJack and Sarah Lynn's friendship and mentorship successively degenerates during the years following the end of *Horsin' Around*. In the process, Sarah Lynn's story line from child star to depressed, alcoholic young adult actress-turned-singer is a tragic commentary on the entertainment industry's treatment of young female celebrities like Britney Spears, but it is aggravated by BoJack's behavior as well, who supports and enables her drug addiction and ends up having sex with her (see S1E3). Finally, he fails to help her when she is dying of a drug overdose (which we see in S3E11). This development of course serves as an indication to audiences that BoJack's own life has long spiraled out of control, while it also highlights his own toxicity and the bitter ironic afterlife of the show's title "*Horsin' Around*". In an interview in the final season, BoJack is confronted with his relationship to Sarah Lynn and attempts to defend himself: "I loved Sarah Lynn. She was like a daughter to me. [ . . . ] I didn't even have sex with her until she was 30!" (Long 2020). The ghost of

Sarah Lynn and his failure haunts BoJack in season 5 as well until her story comes to light again in the final season as a substantial part of his final reckoning.

From one TV show that starts BoJack Horseman's career to the one that will end it roughly twenty-five years later, season 5's *Philbert* is a dark detective show about a lone, twisted individual. On the diegetic level, *Philbert* as a production triggers the dramatic climax of the season in a plotline that involves BoJack's female co-star Gina Cazador, who plays the female detective "Sassy" (again, an unobvious critique of the marketing of female co-stars next to their male leads). The two also begin an affair which later develops into a more serious relationship. *Philbert* is shot against the backdrop of BoJack's intensifying drug addiction (to opioids), his delusions, and hallucinations. The character of Philbert and his dark secrets over the course of the season take over more and more of BoJack's life, blurring the line between fact and fiction. This is hinted at repeatedly in the advertisements for *Philbert* and the show's tagline "What did you do?" In Philbert's case, this points to the fact that he murdered his own wife; in BoJack's case, the question points to his overstepping of boundaries with younger women in the past: with Sarah Lynn, most prominently, and with Penny Carson, the underage daughter of a former girlfriend, in season 2. The question also stands for the larger issues of accountability and responsibility that lie at the heart of season 5, additionally alluding to the violation of the "social bond" and the "social norms" that the season foregrounds.

The dramatic climax of season 5 occurs in its penultimate episode "The Showstopper", when BoJack has become so delusional and paranoid that, while shooting an intense scene with Gina on the set of *Philbert*, he actually strangles her. It is uncomfortable to watch and a prime example of how *BoJack* subverts audience's expectations about the conventionally benign TV sitcom (see [Gilbert 2020](#); [Jaffe 2015](#)). It also an unscripted, dramatically "authentic" even, moment that disrupts the frame of a fictional show's creation. It takes several set members to drag BoJack away, but only after bystanders spend a considerable amount of time watching and looking on before realizing that Gina is in actual physical distress and danger:

Mr Peanutbutter: BoJack? Buddy? [pause.] He's ... really ... strangling her.

Flip [director]: What? Oh no ... turn the camera back on!

Princess Carolyn: Gina, you okay?

Mr Peanutbutter [jumps forward, angry]: Ok, that's enough! ([Long 2018b](#))

Other crew members have started filming (and streaming the scene on social media). Consequently, there is a double layer of voyeurism on the level of the characters and the audience around an incident of physical assault. There is also the brief breakdown of a social bond, or of solidarity, with Gina, because her need of help first has to be identified as valid and necessary by those who witness the scene. The facial and gestural reactions by the other characters, certainly those of Princess Carolyn, Mr Peanutbutter, show that awkwardness, cringe, and discomfort are central to create a community of suffering here, and one that translates to the audience as well. This effect of suffering or shock is supported by the ending credits of the episode which replace the usual song quoted above with an all-black screen and a more subdued melody.

The aftermath of the incident on set, too, illustrates how *BoJack* plays with self-referential formal elements to highlight and critique the performance, or faking, of authenticity and solidarity. BoJack's assault quickly turns into a PR crisis for the *Philbert* show which necessitates a tell-all, confessional interview with its costars and the Oprah Winfrey-stand-in Biscuits Braxby. This interview is arguably the central moment of cringe and discomfort in the arc of protagonist BoJack that season. It is also another decisive moment for how the show deals with issues at the heart of the #MeToo movement. What is visibly at stake is not so much the "how did we get here?" but the "what do we do now?"

In the moments before and during the interview itself, Gina, BoJack's target, is finally given a clear voice. She is very clear about what the incident was—"it was assault [ ... ] and if there were any justice, you would be in jail right now" ([Walker Farrell 2018b](#))—but

BoJack cannot remember anything that happened and needed to be shown the video by his manager Princess Carolyn prior to the interview and to his great dismay. Throughout the season, Gina is very outspoken about her position as a female actress in Hollywood dealing with belittlement, lack of opportunity, and often open sexism. For example, she explains to BoJack: “I do one of these shows every year [ . . . ] [I] show up, do the work, keep my head down. [ . . . ] it feels gratuitous and male-gazey but hey, [it] pays for my expenses [ . . . ]” (S5E1). In a one-on-one with BoJack before the interview begins, she spells out the painful fact of double standards and male privilege in Hollywood but also regains a sense of agency when she rejects BoJack’s wish to confess what he’s done in the interview proper. She explains: “my career, after so many failed attempts, is finally starting to take off. I am getting offers, and fan mail, [ . . . ] people know me because of my acting. And all that goes away if I’m just the girl who got choked by BoJack Horseman. [ . . . ] I don’t want you to be the most notable thing that ever happened to me!” (Walker Farrell 2018b). She openly rejects the role of the victim, which, according to Lenika Cruz, allows her to regain her “dignity” (Cruz 2018), her voice, and a sense of control.

At the same time, the voyeurism of the previous episode is prolonged as the consequences of Gina’s frank talk with BoJack unfold in the interview: first, she is enticed into a kiss with her boyfriend and aggressor BoJack by the interviewer Biscuits Braxby and, finally, is made to mock-strangle him. These gestures, indeed the interview as a whole, are staged, inauthentic, and seem of no consequence other than to appease the viewership of *Philbert* in the Hollywood universe. Through these cringeworthy moments, however, audiences experience discomfort, perhaps even shame. They share this with BoJack, who is also visibly affected. BoJack spends a large amount of season 5 grappling with his identity, past actions, and sometimes wallows in self-pity, but he now wants to face the nature and consequences of his behavior. He tells Gina before the interview that he feels uncomfortable with her wish because “[he] can’t lie about [the incident]”, and later he says to Diane that he is “asking to be held accountable” (Walker Farrell 2018b). Similar to Gina, Diane’s answer to her friend is short: “You need to take responsibility for yourself” (Walker Farrell 2018b). In so doing, she gestures toward a form of solidarity that allows her and viewers to accept Gina’s decision while also signaling to BoJack that there will be consequences for him, but that he cannot dictate them on his own terms.

Aside from formal elements, the question of what happens to men like BoJack is complicated in season 5 on the level of characters through two important #MeToo subplots. The protagonists of these side stories, actor Vance Waggoner and sex robot Henry Fondle, are exaggerated to such crass and absurd extents that they seem negative foils for BoJack, with the incidents in which they are involved openly displaying the mechanisms of institutionalized sexual harassment and violence in Hollywood(d). Vance Waggoner first appears at the beginning of episode 4, “BoJack the Feminist” (see below). Here, a resurfaced video recording shows him attempting to harass a female police officer and yelling antisemitic slurs, a clear nod to real-life actor Mel Gibson, whom the show creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg identifies as the inspiration for the character (see Nickalls 2018). While he is seen to announce his retirement from public life shortly after the mediatized fall-out from the video, the episode also reveals his equally public reinstatement five years later during the episode’s actual events as he is considered as a partner for BoJack’s Philbert character. In addition, Waggoner receives the Lifetime Achievement award at the We Forgive You Awards, or the Forgives. The character of Vance Waggoner figures as a violent individual but also as the negative epitome of a morally corrupt industry in which ritualized performances—public apology media tours, sit-down interviews, etc.—hollow out solidarity with victims and accountability for perpetrators. Such performances also create social norms that work to protect abusers rather than the targets and victims of abuse. Waggoner himself understands these mechanisms all too well: “I sexted a twelve-year-old and still got the Humanitas prize [ . . . ]. Still, by the way, very sorry about sexting that twelve-year-old!” (Walker Farrell 2018a).

The second #MeToo subplot runs parallel to BoJack and Gina's interview in the season's final episode 12, "The Stopped Show". While BoJack and audiences are recovering from the mock-strangulation at the end of the Biscuits Braxby interview, the episode cuts to the office of Todd Chavez, BoJack's former roommate and friend, who has brought his own creation Henry Fondle, a sex robot, to work. In an absurd turn of events, Fondle's randomly spewing inappropriate sexual phrases is taken as serious harassment of a female employee at the firm, and soon "Fondlegate" is making headlines. Aside from obvious references to the #MeToo and Time's Up movements, the episode also makes use of classic comedic strategies of misunderstandings, exaggeration, and satire. They serve to advance the episode's criticism, for example, of the media coverage and public handling of "Fondlegate" and, by extension, similar events. Fondle, for example, is ousted immediately amongst public outcries that claim to forward the voices of his victims, while it is clear to audiences that the central conceit of the subplot—Fondle as a robot with a glitch in his programming—remains intact, which voids much of the Hollywood media outrage of its meaning. What is more, the actual effect of Fondle's "cancel[ation]" (Walker Farrell 2018b) on women is ironically disadvantageous, as a news reporter observes: "this is a great day for the women of this company, many of whom will be laid off" (Walker Farrell 2018b). In contrast, Fondle finds reemployment right away with the executive of a Hollywood megacompany:

Todd: This guy just got fired for sexual harassment, right?

executive: Yes, so he's learned his lesson and he's ready to reenter the workforce!

Henry Fondle: I have many penises.

executive [laughs]: You said it buddy, give us a call. (Walker Farrell 2018b)

With the foils of Vance Waggoner and Henry Fondle, season 5 not least sheds a crucial light on BoJack's precarious position both as a powerful actor in Hollywood as well as the protagonist of an eponymous show. Reviewers have noted that there is "no easy reassurance" (Cruz 2018) when it comes to passing judgment on BoJack, who has been built up as a complicated yet endearing anti-hero for the past seasons, although season 5 marks a turning point for his coming-to-terms with his behavior towards women. On the one hand, BoJack is shown struggling with his guilt and his demand to be held accountable for his actions while on the other, he is still caught in self-victimization and profits unabashedly from his privileged position as a public figure. Although he is initially uncomfortable with his role as Philbert, he profits from the show and his lead role: when his reaction to Vance Waggoner's acceptance speech at the Forgivies is misconstrued as refusing to grant his colleague forgiveness, he must appear on the bird version of *The View* and explain himself on the show (Walker Farrell 2018a). In the course of this interview, another remark on Waggoner leads to his being hailed as a feminist activist. Although the situation is initially awkward for BoJack, who shows signs of wanting to explain himself, the female hosts of *The View* talk about and over him so that his comment "Don't choke women!" becomes the cringey slogan of BoJack's feminist persona, which he gladly accepts in turn: "Yeah, I'm a male feminist, you're welcome society. [ . . . ] I am just staying here being woke" (Walker Farrell 2018a).

What is more, what should accountability and consequence look like for BoJack Horseman when, as the show suggests, women are also implicated in how he is able to use his power and privilege? In fact, aside from exposing male privilege, double standards, and structural inequality of women, all of which play in BoJack's favor, the show also exposes the complicated role of women and their fractured solidarities in this sexist system. Princess Carolyn, for example, his manager, publicist, and former girlfriend, is fully versant in the business rhetoric and manners. She actively enables and tolerates sexist practices of casting and script writing: she organizes the interview with Biscuits and instructs BoJack on how to make this "crisis" go away effectively, considers the known sex offender and domestic abuser Vance Waggoner as a co-star in *Philbert*, and tells him that this "needy role" will make clear to the industry that "it's okay to hire you again" (Walker Farrell 2018a).

Diane, BoJack's long-term friend, biographer, and eventually co-writer of *Philbert*, attempts in vain to change and re-write what she perceives as a sexist script of the show, but much to her dismay, she realizes that this effort backfires: The attempt to portray Philbert as a dark and complex character by using plotlines from BoJack's own past "is just a way to make dumb assholes rationalize their own awful behavior" (Winfrey 2018b). She tries to stop the airing of *Philbert*, but to no avail. For much of the season, she tries to use her insights into the Hollywood machine to appeal to other women and their solidarity. Diane's lines to Waggoner's manager Anna Spanakopita from episode 4 ring throughout season 5: "when you, as a woman, give awful men the cover of your friendship, when you work for them, first of all, they're not gonna get better, and second of all, you are then complicit, no, you are culpable for the terrible things they do!" (Walker Farrell 2018a).

Diane and Princess Carolyn are central characters, too, for how they grapple not simply with their own roles in BoJack's life and career but also with the question of feminism as a concept that is abused in Hollywood. If "BoJack the Feminist" shows how "feminism" becomes an effective PR strategy and a superficial performance to garner media attention, Diane confronts Princess Carolyn in an attempt not least to make her reflect on her responsibility as a woman. In this encounter, Princess Carolyn admits with regard to her former support of Vance Waggoner: "I got blinded by my desire to see myself succeed which, since I am a woman, is actually very feminist. But now Vance can't help me succeed, I realize the more feminist thing to do is to make sure he doesn't succeed either" (Walker Farrell 2018a). As with BoJack, there is no easy answer for Princess Carolyn and Diane, but through the former's change of heart and the latter's role as a "moral compass" of sorts (Wolper 2018), season 5 demonstrates clearly that both are caught in the Hollywood system while also trying to break free from it (which, incidentally, is true for BoJack as well). In so doing, the show opens up questions of solidarity, complicity, culpability and accountability to the women involved with *Philbert* as well as to the women outside of the diegetic level.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Through the investigation of the protagonist's abuse of power, sexual harassment of women, women's roles in the entertainment industry, and more, season 5 eventually forces BoJack to begin a process of self-reflection and of coming to terms with his behavior. Moments of cringe and awkwardness are part and parcel of this process and of the season's overall gesture. The season operates around the binary oppositions of authenticity versus performance and solidarity versus complicitness, which complicates any simplistic judgment of the characters along clear-cut lines. If the season has been lauded for actualizing forms of solidarity, accountability, and punishment, which may have been perceived as lacking or incomplete in the #MeToo era, it does so through a nuanced portrayal of its central characters: BoJack is a perpetrator who is "human" at the same time; Princess Carolyn is complicit but also caught up in the entertainment industry's hostility toward (career) women and working mothers; Diane's moral compass is at times fraught but she attempts to hold her close friend accountable and raise awareness, both of which attempts count as forms of solidarity.

In other words, season 5 emphasizes authenticity—authentic responses, emotions to and in the face of (sexual) assault and abuse of power—as ultimately creative of solidarity and thus, a form of community. The conundrum, however, lies in the recognition that the striving for authenticity, solidarity, "truth" contrasts with—but can ultimately only come about by wrestling with—the performance of authenticity. The instances during the season that are artificially arranged, staged, fake, and performed often entail cringe, awkwardness, or 'sadness' that are built into the season's formal elements and its plotlines.

In their appraisal of *BoJack* as a sadcom, reviewers have remarked that the show uses such subversions or clashes to gain the audience's trust (see Jaffe 2015), which is indicative of an intended emotional charge that reviewers want to see. It is here that the newly coined category of the sadcom also poses an analytical problem. For one, there is a somewhat uncomfortable equalization of reality and fiction: In enabling Gina to speak up for herself

and in pushing BoJack on the road to confession and repentance, *BoJack* is showing us social norms and processes of punishment that we might want to see in actual Hollywood. Bob-Waksberg has admitted that real-life events indeed had a significant impact on the evolution of storylines, not least after “learning Weinstein enjoys *BoJack Horseman*” (Nickalls 2018). “I’m gonna be really bummed out, personally, if we get to the end of the season and the moral is ‘We should all forgive Mel Gibson’” (Bob-Waksberg qtd. in Nickalls 2018).

By also incorporating figures like Vance Waggoner, Henry Fondle, and by exploring multiple perspectives of women, including but not exclusive of Gina, Princess Carolyn, and Diane, the show also suggests how complex accountability, responsibility, and solidarity are. Nevertheless, there is a sense of the age-old (utopian? sentimental?) reliance on fiction to suggest “what it would mean to do it right” (Kotsko 2010b), a dwelling in relief that there is a universe in which this is possible, anthropomorphic as it may be. In the season’s final scene, Diane drops off BoJack at a rehab facility and they share a last candid conversation. BoJack asks, “What if I get sober, but I am still the same awful person I’ve always been?” To which Diane responds: “I think that’s a very real possibility. [But] you’re here. And I hate you. But you’re my best friend and you need me” (Walker Farrell 2018b). Honesty and authenticity, the show suggests, can be a form of solidarity as well, but they require an end to “Horsin’ Around”.

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