

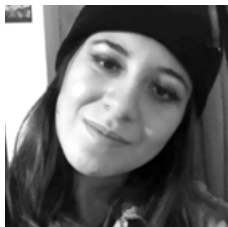
EN Women Creators in BoJack Horseman
ES Mujeres creadoras en BoJack Horseman
ITA Donne creatrici in BoJack Horseman
FRA Femmes créatrices dans Bojack Horseman
POR Mujeres criadoras em BoJack Horseman

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Women Creators in BoJack Horseman

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ABSTRACT (ENG)

BoJack Horseman is one of the productions that treats mental illness as an experience in which numerous people who are diagnosed with mental disorders, to varying degrees, are recognized. In the series, most of the characters that are diagnosed are women, of the same genealogical line who share genetic inheritance and question the meaning of life, motherhood, abortion, success and happiness. What I suggest is that the animated women in the series had everything to do with the team of female directors, creators, filmmakers, producers and illustrators who were part of BoJack Horseman and who reoriented and modified their own diagnoses of mental illness, and took them to their creative works in a therapeutic and public process, which broadened the discussion about mental illness on the television screen and outside of it. From the field of cultural studies, this observation is about women who took agency over their own mental illness diagnoses.

KEYWORDS: *mental illness, BoJack Horseman, Netflix, media cultures, agency, women.*

RESUMEN (ESP)

BoJack Horseman es una de las producciones que trata la enfermedad mental como una experiencia en la que numerosas personas, diagnosticadas con desórdenes mentales en diversos grados, son reconocidas. En la serie, la mayor parte de los personajes que han sido diagnosticados son mujeres de la misma línea genealógica, que comparten una herencia genética y se cuestionan sobre el sentido de la vida, la maternidad, el aborto, el éxito y la felicidad. Lo que sugiero es que las mujeres animadas de la serie guardan una completa relación con el equipo de directoras mujeres, creadoras, directoras de cine, productoras e ilustradoras que hicieron parte de BoJack Horseman. Ellas reorientaron y modificaron sus propios diagnósticos de enfermedad mental y los plasmaron en su trabajo creativo como un proceso terapéutico y público, lo cual amplió la discusión acerca de la enfermedad mental en la pantalla de la televisión y por fuera de ella. Desde el campo de los estudios culturales, observamos

a un grupo de mujeres que asumió la agencia de sus propios diagnósticos de enfermedad mental. Palabras CLAVE: *enfermedad mental, BoJack Horseman, Netflix, culturas mediáticas, agencia, mujeres.*

RIASSUNTI (ITA)

BoJack Horseman è una delle produzioni che affrontano la malattia mentale come un'esperienza nella quale avviene il riconoscimento di diverse persone con diagnosi di disordine mentale in vario grado. Nella serie, la maggior parte dei personaggi diagnosticati sono donne della stessa linea genealogica, che condividono un'eredità genetica e si pongono domande sul senso della vita, la maternità, l'aborto, il successo e la felicità. Ciò che suggerisco è che le donne che prendono vita nella serie mantengono una stretta relazione con il gruppo di registe, creatrici, produttrici e illustratrici che costituì BoJack Horseman; queste riorientarono e modificarono le proprie diagnosi di malattia mentale e le canalizzarono verso il proprio lavoro creativo in un processo terapeutico e pubblico, cosa che accrebbe la discussione intorno alla malattia mentale sullo schermo televisivo e non solo. Dal campo degli studi culturali questa osservazione si riferisce alle donne che si assunsero come agenti delle proprie diagnosi di malattia mentale.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *malattia mentale, BoJack Horseman, Netflix, culture mediatiche, agency, donne.*

RÉSUMÉ (FRA)

Bojack Horseman est une des productions qui traite de la maladie mentale comme une expérience dans laquelle de nombreuses personnes avec un diagnostic de désordres mentaux à différents stades, sont reconnues. Dans la série, la majorité des personnages qui ont été diagnostiqués sont des femmes de la même ligne généalogique, qui partagent une hérédité génétique et s'interrogent sur le sens de la vie, la maternité, l'avortement, le succès et le bonheur. Ce que je suggère est que les femmes animées de la série gardent un véritable lien avec l'équipe des réalisatrices

féminines, créatrices, réalisatrices de cinéma, productrices et illustratrices qui a participé à Bojack Horseman, celles-ci ont réorienté et modifié leurs propres diagnostics de maladie mentale et cela les a menées à un travail créatif dans un processus thérapeutique et public, ce qui a élargi la discussion concernant la maladie mentale à l'écran de télévision et hors de l'écran. Du point de vue des études culturelles, cette observation concerne des femmes qui ont assumé l'agencement de leurs propres diagnostics de maladie mentale.

MOTS CLÉS : *maladie mentale, Bojack Horseman, netflix, cultures médiatiques, agencement, femmes.*

RESUMO (POR)

BoJack Horseman é uma das produções que trata a doença mental como uma experiência na qual se reconhecem inúmeras pessoas, diagnosticadas com transtornos mentais em diferentes graus. Na série, a maioria das personagens diagnosticadas são mulheres da mesma linha genealógica, que têm em comum uma herança genética e questionam o sentido da vida, a maternidade, o aborto, o sucesso e a felicidade. O que sugiro é que as mulheres animadas da série tenham uma relação plena com a equipe de diretoras mulheres, criadoras, cineastas, produtoras e ilustradoras que fizeram parte de BoJack Horseman, e que reorientaram e modificaram os seus próprios diagnósticos de doença mental e os trouxeram para o seu trabalho criativo em um processo terapêutico e público, que ampliou a discussão sobre a doença mental dentro e fora das telas de televisão. No domínio dos estudos culturais, esta observação se refere a mulheres que assumiram o controle dos seus próprios diagnósticos de doença mental.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *doença mental, BoJack Horseman, Netflix, culturas mediáticas, agência, mulheres.*

THERE ARE MULTIPLE AND STEREOTYPED relationships between women and mental illness. One of them is the idea of an emotional

body as opposed to a rational one; emotion as coined to women and understood as irrationality that needs to be controlled, explained in length in 'With notable damage to good service: on female madness in the first half of the 20th century in Bogotá' (2006), by the Colombian anthropologist María Angélica Ospina¹. Additionally, due to the medical diagnosis' hegemony and rhetoric, when suffering a mental disorder, we tend to give our agency and individual responsibility away for a doctor to take care of it; as well, this burden is mediated by stigma and an identity reconfiguration. As the Spanish doctor from the Feminist and Gender Studies program, María Zapata, points out, "having been diagnosed with a mental disorder has been a burden, especially because of the social stigma that it entails and because it prevents them from projecting themselves out of discomfort" (Zapata, 2019, p. 176). It is common for diagnosed people to identify themselves with a label:

people begin to enunciate from that place, and form their identity around that experience, so breaking with discomfort finally becomes a break with oneself. This is so, insofar as our society believes that the diagnosis is chronic, that it lasts a lifetime, often denying the possibility of recovery. (Zapata, 2019, p. 177).

From the received / chosen label, an identity reconfiguration is developed supported by the discourses and meanings of the medical model. Diagnoses and the stigma associated with them symbolically separate

people from their environment because they lead to misunderstanding the person who is going through the experience, "creating value judgments that do not help recovery." (Zapata, 2019, p. 168).

This is the reason why, in this article, I will focus on the life stories of three women who were diagnosed with mental disorders and gave up defining themselves through them. These women are aware of their diagnoses and in their works and public presentations challenge labels, stigmas and misconceptions about mental illness.

They fulfilled different professional roles in the Netflix animated series *BoJack Horseman*. Kate Purdy was part of the writer's group in roles of editor or lead writer, for which she was given credit for several episodes. As editor, she worked in collaboration with the main writer and other staff writers, drafting the episode scripts, suggesting improvements to initial ideas and ensuring that the narrative continuity of the episodes was ready to deliver the script to the production group.

Lisa Hanawalt was the design producer for all episodes of the series. She had the responsibility of designing the episodes' visual presentation and working in collaboration with writers, illustrators and animators such as Anne Walker Farrell. The latter was the animation director of five of the six seasons of the series and general director of several episodes, she worked directing the animation team during the production process and following the indications of the general director of each episode. She also worked as general director, giving directions to the animation team, the art directors and following the script produced by the writers.

Each of them included something of their personal or family experiences in the episodes they were part of. Kate included her family memories with dementia and mental illness in the five episodes she wrote; Anne included her experience with anxiety and depression to direct six episodes.

There is a numerous and decisive presence of women in the development of the six seasons (6) and the seventy-seven (77) episodes of the series. In the production, women played writing, animation, illustration, directing and editing roles. This is much more than in other television productions of the same period and of a

¹ The illness sign considered feminine was their ability to carry out housework without being interrupted by their emotions; on the contrary, the sign of masculine disease, was that of aggressiveness, very rarely indicated in women. In Ospina, M. (2006). Con notable daño del buen servicio: sobre la locura femenina en la primera mitad del siglo XX en Bogotá. *Antípoda. Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, 2, 303-314.

similar genre, in which these roles were played by men². Of a total of twenty-two writers in the series, twelve are women; out of five people in editing roles, three are women, and throughout the series, the production design role was always handled by the same designer, Lisa Hanawalt. Additionally, of the twenty-five *BoJack Horseman* episodes that explicitly included mental illness³, seventeen were written or directed by women; and these are precisely the most popular among the audience, with ratings over 8.0 on IMDb⁴; some have been nominated and awarded for writing or animation⁵.

LISA HANAWALT

Lisa, the 37-year-old American illustrator, producer, and design coordinator, shyly introduces herself to the audience at the xoxo Festival in 2015. In the 18.36-minute video, we see her before a screen that fills the stage completely. As she talks about herself, she passes, one by one, the slides with which she supports what she affirms about her work and about herself:

oo '28''. Black and white slide of a pencil illustration of herself —Lisa— speaking in public with a microphone in hand and with the handwritten phrase at the top: Public-speaking outfit. In the drawing, the jacket and pants of her sweatshirt show various marks of sweat.

- 2 Some of the Netflix productions and contemporaries to *BoJack Horseman*, in which the majority of episodes were written by men are: *Disenchantment* (2018) and *Rick and Morty* (2013). I insist that the difference between one and the other has to do with those who write, men and / or women.
- 3 The episodes that explicitly include mental illnesses in *BoJack Horseman* are: So1E01: "The *BoJack Horseman* Story"; So1E03: "Prickly-Muffin"; So1E12: "Later"; So2E08: "Let's Find Out"; So2E09: "Best Thing that Ever Happened"; So2E10: "Yes And"; So3E11: "That's Too much, Man"; So3E12: "That Went Well"; So4E02: "The Old Sugarman Place"; So4E05: "Thoughts and Prayers"; So4E06: "Stupid Piece of Sh * t"; So4E07: "Underground"; So4E08: "The Judge"; So4E10: "Lovin' that Cali Lifestyle"; So4E11: "Time's Arrow"; So5E02: "Ancient History"; So6E02: "The New Client"; So6E05: "A Little Uneven, is all"; So6E06: "The Kidney Stays in the Picture"; So6E07: "The Face of Depression"; So6E08: "A Quick One, while He's Away"; So6E10: "Good Damage"; So6E14: "Angela" and So6E15: "The View from Halfway Down".
- 4 The IMDb website conducted a survey in 2020, with 101,412 users, who rated the series and each of the episodes on a scale of 1.0 to 10.0.
- 5 Some of the awards given to episodes of *BoJack Horseman* are 45th Annie Awards / Best General Audience Animated TV / Broadcast Production (2018) and 70th Writers Guild of America Awards / Television: Animation (2018), the latter for Kate Purdy.

A little nervous laugh comes out:

—I am a terrible, lazy and talentless artist.

oo '47''. A color slide with the image of a woman in home clothes, blue jumpsuit and green pants, lying face down on a light blue sofa, staring at the floor. It's her.

Lisa explains that her creative moments are almost always motivated, or produced by, her anxiety. Negative emotions and emotional paralysis, similar to the famous writers' blocks, make her think that her work is not worth it. After dealing with it, she adds, she believes that part of her creative process has been allowing herself to feel that her work is not good.

oo '59''. Slide of a picture drawn with many colorful tree trunks; in the center, a man, standing with his back turned, with his pants down.

When she lived in New York, Lisa developed agoraphobia. She justified her reasons for not leaving her house, to whoever that would ask her, with the explanation that she could suffer a car accident or get sick or experience a panic attack or explode and leave her organs lying in the street.

oo '02''. Color slide with illustrations in three panels with a moose girl with golden fur, a tight red shirt and pink underwear lying face down on the bed next to her boyfriend, a cat boy with brown fur, a pink shirt and orange shorts who is lying on his back and facing away, holding a blue cell phone in his right hand.

It was while staying at home that she illustrated and wrote the interspecies comic, *Moosefingers* (2014), in which a moose artist girl discusses with her boyfriend, a cat boy, the reasons why she doesn't feel fine with her work. Before the arguments the cat boy responds in one line:

—It doesn't matter if you feel good or bad while doing things, just do them.

Lisa admitted that this story actually happened, she was the moose girl and her boyfriend the cat boy. Lisa did catharsis with these characters and doing so allowed

her to understand that feeling bad while doing something doesn't really affect its quality. Her work would be good or bad by itself.

In an interview for the making of the book *BoJack Horseman: The Art Before the Horse* (2018), the illustrator insisted that she constantly drew at school. Even in this moment, she recognizes that she draws to calm down and keep her hands busy when she feels uncomfortable speaking out loud:

—I was doing short comics, in the style of Phoebe Gloeckner — who was my favorite cartoonist at the time, alongside Renée French — and I was drawing in every class. My brother had bought me a ton of comics, I started reading them and I really got interested in them. I was also very fond of magazines — self-published brochures, usually photocopied and hand-stapled. I started doing a fanzine in high school called 'Bobster Rags', with my poetry, product reviews, and messy musings. I would do comics about myself and how I felt because I was a very emotional teenager. I went through a lot of trouble in high school. I was severely depressed and failing all my classes. I almost had to go to a different school, but I said to myself "No, you know what? I'm going to hang on." So I went on and got really involved in theater and graduated with a really good GPA, I think theater saved me a bit. (McDonnell, 2018, p. 29).

In a 2016 conversation with Sarah Mirk for *Drawn & Quarterly*, Lisa discussed the depression she had suffered since high school and how she deals with anxiety now that she is an adult, for which she invented an alternate personality:

—I made up a persona for my anxiety, and his name is Kyle. He's like a big bro. So I made some drawings of him. It was suggested to me by a shrink that I should make a name for my anxiety, so I immediately named him Kyle and thought of him as a bro. I don't know why. It was just like Okay, yeah. He's someone who takes up space, and he doesn't know any better. It's not malicious at all. He's not there to hurt me. He's just like, "Hey, what's up?" He just kinda barges in. So to me, that seemed like the perfect alter ego [laughs]. Maybe that sounds insane! I find it very helpful 'cause it's like, Oh, okay. My anxiety's not gonna harm me. It's just Kyle. So normally I keep that to myself, but if it's got some use to anyone, then that would be great.

However, Kyle isn't always a manageable alter ego, sometimes as Lisa says, Kyle becomes paralysis and that's when she knows she's been neglecting him.

When in 2011, her friend from school, Raphael Bob Waksberg, proposed in an email for her to work on the project that would later be *BoJack Horseman*, anxiety invaded her. She found it terrifying to think that she had to work with so many people. Even after she became the production designer, she stated, in her interview with Sarah Mirk (2016), that this fear persisted:

—I feel very uncomfortable when I speak out loud, the more people in the room the more difficult it is, but I have learned to adapt.

Lisa initially rejected the proposal but, at Waksberg's insistence, six months later she agreed to be the design producer, that is, responsible for the visual presentation of each of the *BoJack Horseman* episodes. Her illustrations defined the visual aesthetics of the entire show's animation.

In addition to this, Lisa illustrated and directed the video *Hang on to the Night* (August 16, 2016), by the band Tegan and Sara, that the two music sisters created with the intention of facing the anxiety caused by the death of some of their relatives. The video was starred by a purple horse, accompanied by various nocturnal creatures, while he detaches from his body marks that hang in the sky like stars. Sara, the musician and composer, contacted Lisa on Twitter and, according to Lisa, she responded that being herself a person with anxiety, she had connected with the song perfectly, and she accepted. The video reiterates the inter-species coexistence in human bodies with the heads of plants, cats that ride on horses or that fly from their shoulders and snakes transformed into plants that are kept in a house.

Finally, Lisa's latest project, also from Netflix, *Tuca & Bertie*, was canceled after the first season and taken up by Cartoon Network's Adult Swim block. *Tuca & Bertie*⁶ is about the friendship of two women in their thirties, once again visualized in anthropomorphic characters, the toucan Tuca and the thrush bird Bertie, who live in the same building. They are friends with strikingly different

6 In *Tuca & Bertie*, topics such as sexual harassment, rape, and the traumas that can arise from these acts are discussed based on Bertie's story. In the penultimate episode of the series it is revealed that Bertie was raped as a teenager by her swimming instructor. This caused her a phobia of entering and swimming in any lake. At the end of this episode, after talking about it, Bertie is able to swim across the entire lake.

personalities: Tuca is a carefree toucan who, apparently, acts without thinking about the consequences; Bertie is an insecure bird who is constantly assaulted by anxiety attacks, just as Lisa is.

ME AND HIM: ILLNESS AS KYLE

Lisa Hanawalt's observations can be related to those of the Canadian literary and cultural studies theorist Ann Cvetkovich: "in the face of negative feelings that can seem so debilitating, so far from hope about the future, the goal is to generate new ways of thinking about agency" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 25). In some of the pages of *Moosefingers* (2014), Lisa changed the role of a diagnosed woman, a victim of negative feelings that did not let her work and made her think she was a terrible artist, for those of a woman who continued to write with her discomfort and using it to understand that, although it does not make her a better artist, neither does it condemn her to her work being bad, it only changes its process of realization.

Lisa Hanawalt's experience coincides with Ann Cvetkovich; according to the academic, it is decisive to approach the diagnoses with strategies that allow dissociating the consequences of the disease personally and emotionally: "there are no magic solutions for depression, be they medical or political, there is only the slow and constant work of survival, utopian dreams and other affective tools for transformation" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 25). Lisa gave mental disease a different identity and turned it into a brother that she called Kyle, thereby distancing the totality of who she is from him. Kyle won't hurt you, although he won't leave. In the words of Sara Ahmed: You have to recognize negative emotions, allow yourself to feel them and work with them.

These strategies allow us to think of depression and anxiety as something that returns from time to time but that we are able to moderate. It is reassuring to know that it is something that returns and that we are not under pressure to find a definitive solution for it, because there isn't one.

USE OF HUMOR FOR TREATING COMPLEX SUBJECTS

The American author of literature and languages Valeria Di Pasquale (2019) points out that comedy and humor are used as tools, not ends, to explore tragic,

difficult and taboo topics: "Comedy and humor create a path through which the characters are understood by the viewer. To do this, a certain absence of feeling must be achieved, a symbolic distancing from the subject in order to be able to talk about it" (Di Pasquale, 2019, p. 6). Lisa mentions, referring to *BoJack Horseman*: "Somehow it is easier to talk about serious issues through the lens of these animal cartoons, if we replace a man with a cartoon of a horse, the perception surrounding the character changes substantially" (McDonnell, 2018, p. 6).

Di Pasquale proposes in *The Elephant in the Room: How Comedy and Animation Become Tools to Understand Serious / Taboo Subjects in BoJack Horseman* (2019) that the presence of anthropomorphic animals is the first layer of comedy that *BoJack Horseman* imposes on these themes and explains the need for a "momentary anesthesia of the heart" (Di Pasquale, 2019, p. 6). In the opinion of both authors, both comedy and humor are effective strategies to present themes that are socially complex, serious and taboo and to eventually, distancing from them.

KATE PURDY

36-year-old American writer Kate, began her television career writing for shows like *Cold Case* (2003), *Secret Girlfriend* (2009), *The McCarthys* (2014), *Enlisted* (2014), *Mad TV* (1995) and *BoJack Horseman* (2014), series in which she produced 49 episodes and wrote 5 of them⁷. Kate has an extensive writing experience, having mentored many writers working on the Imagine Impact program and the David Lynch School of Cinematic Arts Screenwriting MFA program at Maharishi University in 2017. She led, under the same program, several Screenwriting residency classes at Fairfield University in October 2019.

In an interview with 'Three If By Space' at the 2019 Comic-Con convention, Kate tells that she has suffered from depression and anxiety and that she has always wondered about the state of her mental health.

In the article "How the Creator of 'Undone' Turned Her Mental Break into A Healing TV Series", by Samantha Rollins in 2019 for *Bustle* magazine, Kate says that the first time she was able to see her cerebral ventricles was in college, in a CT scan to detect viral meningitis. They were enlarged, the doctor explained, but she assured her it was not a big deal. When she read an article in *Times*

7 Kate Purdy wrote the following *BoJack Horseman* episodes: S05E01: "The Light Bulb Scene"; S04E11: "Time's Arrow"; S04E02: "The Old Sugarman Place"; S03E09: "Best Thing That Ever Happened" and S01E11: "Downer Ending".

Magazine in 2006 about a study called ‘Understanding structural brain changes in schizophrenia’⁸, which linked large brain ventricles to schizophrenia, she began to worry. Schizophrenia ran in her family; her grandmother Geraldine and two of her great-uncles, had had it. Also, as she put it in the interview at Comic-Con (2019), her parents had suffered from depression and anxiety and she had suffered from depression in college.

This is a fragment of the study to which the article referred: “The most recent approach of our research group has been to extend the previous longitudinal studies in the time from the first episode to the study of individuals with high genetic risk of schizophrenia who are in the age range for the maximum incidence of developing the disorder, before the age of 30” (Delisi, Szulc, Bertisch, Majcher & Brown, 2006, p. 15).

So Kate started counting the days until her 30th birthday in hopes that she would cross the line and be free of it. Even though she was in her 30s, she was still concerned that she might have schizophrenia.

My grandmother was schizophrenic, she was one of the only ones in my family and I never really understood it because there are so many secrets surrounding that story. She died before I was born and my dad never wanted to talk about it. So I was always curious to know about my own mental health, my genetics⁹. I had various experiences with anxiety throughout my life and when I was thirty I had a severe nervous breakdown. I didn’t know what was happening to me, I didn’t know how to get out of it or what to do. (Interview, Comic-Con, 2019).

Kate includes personal details of her life in the productions she works on. In an interview with Vulture in 2017, ‘Jen Chaney’s a Deep Dive into BoJack Horseman’s Heartbreaking Dementia Episode’, Kate talks about how ideas came up for one of the *BoJack Horseman* episodes that explicitly involves mental illness.

To discuss dementia in BoJack Horseman’s S04E11 episode “Time’s Arrow”, everyone on the writing and animation team, in addition to researching dementia, discussed their mental illness experiences with members of their families.

We talk a lot about our own experiences in the room, we talk and compare how our memories work. (Interview, Vulture, 2017).

She tells us in the same interview that she used a memory of her great-aunt and an episode of dementia that was told in her family:

I had a great aunt who at 93 years of age developed breast cancer and was in the hospital for this reason. She had dementia and kept asking for her baby. My grandmother, her sister, had her heart broken listening to her and she went to get her a doll, and she gave her the doll. That reassured her. I guess I thought a lot about that scene when creating the episode.

In the narrative of the episode there is a temporal break between 1944 and 2018 and scenes in which the characters share and travel the same space simultaneously, despite being in different temporalities. For this treatment of time within the narrative – diegetic time – to show dementia, Purdy was awarded the WGA award –Writers Guild of America Award for Television: Animation– 2017–.

Kate refers to this episode in another interview for the book *BoJack Horseman: The Art Before the Horse* (2018):

“Time’s Arrow” was the most exciting episode for me so far, due to the surreal nature of it and time travel. Almost all the scenes have some strange visual element. We tried to find unique transitions between scenes, as well as constant visual cues to remind the audience that this was not a conventional biopic-style life story, but rather skipped through blurred

8 The study is available online as follows: DeLisi, Lynn; Szulc, Kamilla; Bertisch, Hilary; Majcher, Magda & Brown, Kyle. (2006).

9 In the series that Kate Purdy co-created with BoJack Horseman creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg, reference is made to this part of Kate’s life. Alma, the main character, discovers that her grandmother had schizophrenia and that her father never wanted to say anything about it because it caused him a lot of pain and it caused a lot of embarrassment in her family.

memories. Details like pictures on the walls changing their image or characters without faces because Beatrice does not remember them. (McDonnell, 2018, p. 207).

The decision to show the characters that Beatrice did not remember without faces or with scribbled faces was a joint decision between the group of writers, animators and illustrators.

Kate also tapped into her family and personal experience with schizophrenia to write and co-create with Raphael Bob Waksberg, creator of *BoJack Horseman*, the Amazon animated series *Undone* (2019).

Undone (Waksberg & Purdy, 2019) tells the story of Alma, a 28-year-old girl, close to the age Kate was when she thought she would develop schizophrenia, who discovers a new relationship with time after almost dying in a car accident. She learns to harness that new ability to uncover the truth about the murder of her father. She constantly has hallucinations in which she sees her dead father. Kate included her history with mental illness for the character's conception and the overall storyline.

We started talking about our own personal and family lives. I told [Raphael Bob Waksberg] about my grandmother Geraldine, who had schizophrenia, and my own fears about mental health. I was going through a divorce and a difficult time in my life, and I discovered all these alternative healing modalities and met shamans all over the world. As a result, I came to see our world and our approach to mental health in a new light.

After trying various medical treatments, Kate finally found benefits in indigenous and Ayurvedic medicines, ancient healing practices of India and Mexico, and points out, as Alma's father does in the series, that many shamanic and indigenous traditions see mental health differently than we traditionally do. In some cultures, Kate says in the same interview, for example, hallucinations are viewed as powerful and valuable visions, not life-threatening signs of insanity.

I do not want to give the idea that medicine or pills or traditional talk therapy are not useful or cannot be useful, we think it is or it can be, but if we manage to expand our idea of seeing what is happening, or what it is reality, we may experience or understand it in different ways.

Alma, within the series, also has large cerebral ventricles and, after the accident, her dead father continues to appear everywhere, imploring him to solve the mystery of his death. Seen that way, perhaps Alma's visions of her dead father are not disturbing signs that a woman has gone mad, but rather "an ancestor pulling you out of your reality," Kate explains, "for you to make decisions that are better for you and the people you love." (Interview, AV Club, 2019).

DIAGNOSES OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN FAMILY HISTORIES

These are some of the experiences that both the creators and the authors draw between mental health and family history, past, present, or, in certain cases, unknown: Ann Cvetkovich explains that the moment her father was diagnosed with manic depression was when her family separated completely.

Traditional family ties are affected when dealing with mental illness taking into account what it entails, not only in the private sphere - meaningless phrases, crying, disinterest in eating, sleeping or washing - but, simultaneously, in the public spheres of the neighborhood, work and education:

Cvetkovich says about it:

On Christmas day, my sister and I opened up our presents with my mother while he stayed in bed. That was the year we had managed to find all of our presents in a closet before Christmas, so we weren't surprised about any of them, but we didn't care. In that next year, my father lost everything. My mother left without warning, and my sister and I were sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Vancouver. He was hospitalized, his law practice was closed down, and he had to sell the house. When he became manic again in the fall, my aunt and uncle were worried that my sister and I were in danger with him, and we were again abruptly moved, this time to Toronto to rejoin my mother. (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 41).

Within Cvetkovich's story there are several elements that catch one's attention. The fact that her mother had left her father because of the mental illness that invaded him indicates that mental illness is not glamorous but

rather exhausting and disconcerting for family members. It does not bring families together; not in most of the cases anyway.

In addition to this, Cvetkovich mentions:

Twenty- odd years later, I wondered if my experience was anything like my father's. Once, a good friend, someone who could really get in close to the bone, asked if I was afraid that I would become my father, and suddenly, rather than just shrugging off the question, I did feel genuinely afraid. Contemplating the repetition across the generations, I sometimes fell into a superstitious fatalism. I noticed, for example, that I turned thirty- three in 1990, the same age at which my father rose high and fell hard. (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 41).

The fear is that if we recognize it in our parents, we accept it in ourselves. There's a belief, turned into a fantasy, that mental illness is genetically inherited and, therefore, we will not be able to escape it. That's when, as Anne and Kate describe it, we start comparing ages and speculating whether when you're the same age, the same thing will happen to you. Will I have hallucinations? Or will I be admitted to a psychiatric clinic? Kate's concern, that the schizophrenia was genetic and therefore the history of her grandmother could be repeated, led her to include this subject in *Undone*, noting how detrimental keeping secrets and staying silent about mental illness has been to her family.

ANNE WALKER FARRELL

Anne, 35 years old, was the animation director for five seasons of *BoJack Horseman* and directed six episodes of the series. In an interview for the book *BoJack Horseman: The Art Before the Horse* (2018), Anne recounts that she has dealt with depression and anxiety since she was a child: "I've been in a dark place, struggled with depression and anxiety my entire life, and I was able to scream a lot about what I felt in the art I was making."

These artistic expressions can be seen in her stories, photos and samples of her work on her Instagram page. At the beginning of 2020 she posted a series of six panels from a comic that she had just begun to write and draw titled 'Self-indulgent Diary Comics'. She accompanied those first vignettes with the hashtags #theartistsway,

#depression, #mental health, #childhoodmemories and the description "I'm not sure where I'm going with this but it is surely the first issue of a comic series."

I'll introduce Anne using Self-indulgent Diary Comics:

The first vignette shows an illustration of her father – a tall, thin man, with thinning hair, wearing a business suit with a tie – and one of her mother -a slim woman, a little shorter than him, with straight, short and groomed hair, with a tight-fitting dress, colored in blue. In the background there is an advertisement for CIA 1975 and with an asterisk a text that compares Anne's father with Archer, – a fictional spy and protagonist of the famous animated series for adults, *Archer* (2009) by FX –.

The illustrator explains to us in handwritten texts next to the drawings of her father and mother, that she chose gold for her father to indicate the confidence he had in himself and his pride when he was in his twenties, while she chose blue for his mother to summon her nickname, The Ice Queen, because of her difficulty in opening up emotionally.

In an interview with NYFA Podcasts (Women in Animation, 2019), Anne reflects that what they then perceived as a difficulty for the mother to open up emotionally was actually the fact that she worked constantly and worried about continuing her professional life after having children. Attitude that she, as with her nickname, was criticized for. Anne claims, in that very first comic strip, her self-confidence – inherited from her father – and her strength – inherited from her mother.

The second panel is a self-portrait of Anne, colored in green. She is shown as a slim girl, with large glasses that cover half of her face and long straight hair. Green results from the mixture of yellow-father and blue-mother; in the handwritten texts that accompany the drawing she describes:

"I'm tall and conventionally pretty. I'm innocent enough to be relatable and funny, but not innocent enough to be obnoxious or really vulnerable. It is a tactic and it works".

Next to it are speech balloons with the words anxiety and depression.

In the third panel, she drew a series of balloons, of different sizes and colors, some empty and others with phrases such as:

Socializing infuriates me. I feel exhausted after interacting with a large group of people for a long time. There is no escape!! It exhausts me, but I still do it even though I find it so tremendously difficult. I've done it all my life.

The fourth panel was illustrated with Anne-girl smiling, with braces, large glasses, her hair in a half ponytail, standing on one foot on a podium with a trophy and a first-place medal. All colored green. She is surrounded by trophies with texts: piano trophies, art awards and perfect grades. On a balloon whose corner comes out from close to her face it reads: "Dancing gives us trophies and trophies give us love !!!".

In the fourth panel, Anne questions whether her art is linked to her childhood and to having accepted the pressure imposed by her mother and her father and what they demanded of her. In a text she asks: "Was I ever a real human being or have I always been an accomplice?"

The last two vignettes -of 6 in total- are for the current Anne and are intended to let us know that, together with her husband, she decided to get rid of the trophies she won as a child, as well as getting rid of the tensions caused by not having said "NO!" to the adults who pressured her.

In the fifth panel of the illustration of a garbage can the following words appear: "panic attacks, tears, loneliness, stress, rage, carpal tunnel at age 10"; and from the illustration of an adult Anne, in which she wears the same large glasses, her hair is tied back and, adds a broom in her hand, the text comes out: "I felt good, lighter."

In the final panel there is an illustration of an adult Anne next to the trash can with the text: "However, like my father, I am a fool. I want an Emmy award."

This way of illustrating her memories and emotions leads us to Anne's *BoJack Horseman* S04E06 episode "Stupid Piece of Sh * t", in which we see animated illustrations on screen while listening to BoJack's negative thoughts.

Anne was part of the main direction of the episode and the animation, and she decided to show BoJack's anxiety as we see it on screen. Anne refers to this episode in the interview for *BoJack Horseman: The Art before the Horse* (2018).

We dived into BoJack's head, settled on a United Productions of America style. BoJack is impatient and immature and hedonistic — how appropriate is it that he sees the world as an angry five-year-old scribbling with crayons! We follow him around his mind and into the darkness of his thoughts. I love this episode for many reasons, perhaps mainly because, in the style of BoJack, I do not feel the need to tell the viewer that everything will be fine in the end (McDonnell, 2018, p. 196).

Anne became linked to *BoJack Horseman* because in 2014 Mike Hollingsworth, the series director, producer and supervisor, sent her a message on Facebook offering her a vacancy to be the animation director on the show.

And I said yes, sure, that's fine. I was grumpy so I sat down and watched the animatic for episode 4 of the first season. It seemed so dark and weird and smart to me that I realized I needed to be involved in this project.

ILLUSTRATING MENTAL ILLNESS EXPERIENCE

In her 'Self-indulgent Diary Comics', Anne illustrates memories of her depression and anxiety. Professional illustration has become an ideal space for intimate women who prefer to work in their own studios, and who elaborate and share their visions and life experiences through their characters and the plots in which they are inserted. Colombian illustrator Ana María López, in her comic 'Panic', draws feelings that invade her due to panic disorder and agoraphobia. By accessing her memories and publishing them, she says she feels free: "Until now, I don't feel that being honest and showing myself vulnerable takes my power away. I do not feel that I put myself in a lower place, but quite the opposite: that it shows value" (Interview, Bacánika, 2019). López expresses that reading the comic "makes one not feel so alone or so

unique in the world, and allows us to get off our pride and consider that we are all dealing with our own monsters” (Interview, Bacánika, 2019).

Ana María and Anne show us through their work that accessing their memories is a sign of courage. That allows them to put them on paper and expand the conversation so that they and many others know that they are not alone in that situation.

IDENTIFICATION AND DISTANCING EXPERIENCES WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

The process that these women have carried out with their experiences -family and personal- with mental illness is, in fact, a therapeutic strategy that allows a process of identification and distancing. The American and Puerto Rican psychiatrists, Patrick O'Connor and Josué Cardona, international guests in the mental health course at the University La Sabana in 2014, explained that comics are a tool to help patients with psychological illnesses. The same thing was insisted on at the 2020 Comic-Con, with 3 papers presented in this regard¹⁰.

O'Connor has used comics with girls and boys. The psychiatrist first encouraged them to identify themselves with a comic book character, then urged them to rewrite the story using their own stories. It is the identification processes and the creative rewriting processes that first allow them to dissociate their memories and distance themselves, and then to talk about them in public.

As well, the Postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago Adam Szymanski, takes on Felix Guattari's concept of vector of subjectification (Guattari, 1995, p. 25), to explain how the act of seeing cinematic images can result in a process of subjectification that can turn out to be therapeutic in depression treatment. This therapeutic potential is given through the images possibility to “encounter alterity, create common planes of experience and building alternative relationships with others” (Szymanski, 2020, p. 155). What the author proposes is that through the recognition of alterity, the subject can develop processes of identification and empathy –prior

to distancing from pain and personal drama- that are in themselves possible supplements to medical treatment of mental illnesses.

FINAL THOUGHTS

AGENCY ON DIAGNOSES OF MENTAL ILLNESS FROM THE FIELD OF CULTURAL STUDIES

The Canadian literary and cultural studies theorist, Ann Cvetkovich, and Sara Ahmed, PhD from the Center for Critical and Cultural Theory of the British-Australian University of Cardiff, enrolled in the Public Feelings¹¹ project in cultural studies, consider agency and mental illness:

Referring to depression, Cvetkovich states that: “in the face of negative feelings that can seem so debilitating, so far from hope about the future, the goal is to generate new ways of thinking about agency” (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 25).

According to the author, one way of working with diagnoses is to assume them, affect them, talk about them and, as Cvetkovich and Ahmed themselves do in their creative writing processes, move away from the totalizing role of the diagnosed person to have the possibility of exploring the diagnoses in creative and academic ways, without denying their existence.

Anne Cvetkovich and Sara Ahmed argue that writing is a way of working with negative emotions generated by depression or anxiety, and that, by sharing memories about their experiences with mental illness, they led to critical discussions about these diagnoses.

Cvetkovich emphasizes that for her critical work it was decisive to access her individual experience and understand that depression “is not only a medical illness but a cultural phenomenon” (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 23). The author takes agency of her own diagnosis when treating the disease, including her own, from the cultural dimension. She does not deny that mental illness exists

10 The virtual presentations at the Comic-Con 2020 convention that had to do with the use of comics as tools to help people with mental illness are: Mental Health and the Power of Comics Featuring “Dark Agents”, Comics During ClampDown: Creativity in the Time of COVID and “Crazy” Talk: Mental Health, Pop Culture, and the Pandemic.

11 From Public Feelings, the relationship between the public, the private and the affective is explored, the meaning of everyday life and the affective experience, focusing on “how to live accepting, instead of ignoring, bad feelings”. (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 3).

or the fact that it has affected her daily life, but she makes use of it to analyze it, try to understand it and generate a therapeutic outlet that allows her not to feel “trapped”.

Sara Ahmed continues this argument in ‘The Promise of Happiness’ (2010), where she includes within negative emotions, feelings of anxiety that lead her to frequently ask ‘why am I not happy with this?’, ‘What is wrong with me?’ These feelings then unleash altered states in her. Those are not just questions. For Ahmed, “disease is a cultural phenomenon insofar as we assume the gap between the impressions we have of others, which are alive, and the impressions we make on others.” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 5). According to this argument, and taking up that of Cvetkovich, mental illness is a medical matter and a label that involves thinking about how we understand and narrate ourselves and others in the light of a diagnosis.

Ahmed expresses that, for her, writing is a type of rebellion “not to explain what negative emotions are but what they do and how the circulation of pain narratives produces particular subjects” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 2). This rebellion allows you to be aware of negative emotions and the labels used to name them and to know that people exist in all their uniqueness and complexity when they have also received a mental illness diagnosis.

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