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Reviewing *Bojack Horseman*'s Todd Chavez

Upon first glance, one wouldn't expect anything from the show *Bojack Horseman* in the way of insightful commentary. It's animated, colorful, no stranger to silliness and filled to the brim with thoroughly ridiculous plotlines. That being said, any seasoned viewer knows that the show not only strikes an incredible balance between irreverence and deep meaning, but is also incredibly effective at realistically depicting characters. In no other show can you start an arc with a character competing in a ski race to become the Governor of California and end with meaningful commentary on love, marriage, and the brutal realism of divorce. This juxtaposition of silliness and sincerity is best embodied in the character of Todd Chavez, a man in his mid twenties who's first introduced as living rent-free on a couch in the titular character's house. He's lazy, laidback, prone to nonsensical catchphrases and stumbling his way into the most bizarre situations. But he's also incredibly caring, driven, sympathetic, and selfless. He delivers some of the most piercing and relevant dialogue in the entire series. He's also, as viewers find out halfway through the show, asexual. So, does *Bojack Horseman* do as effective a job portraying a marginalized identity as it does mixing meaning with the ridiculous?

To answer this question, we first have to start with how the show depicts Todd's development as a sexual citizen, how he first comes to realize that he's asexual in the first place. *Bojack Horseman* shines in this regard, and it makes use of two important concepts from Shamus Khan and Jennifer Hirsch's book *Sexual Citizens*: sexual projects and sexual geographies. Todd's journey as a sexual citizen begins in earnest at the start of Season 3. In Episode 2 of the season, we see a flashback, presumably of Todd in high school, that follows him and a friend Emily as they shut themselves in the back closet at a party. Emily, interestingly enough, is what Khan and

Hirsch would refer to as the “sexual aggressor”. She’s clearly interested in moving the interaction forward, but viewers see Todd grow increasingly uncomfortable and uncertain about what to do. Flash forward to Season 2 Episode 5, back in the present, where Todd and Emily meet again, presumably after around a decade lacking communication between them. Emily eventually makes motions towards a sexual relationship, but Todd, uncertain about what he wants, deflects, delays, and avoids any kind of sexual intimacy.

These two moments cleverly and subtly reflect a key societal failure that Khan and Hirsch bring to light: underdeveloped sexual projects. Todd, presumably, was never encouraged to even consider, let alone define, his sexual project, to consider what sex is for or whether he wants it. He’s left in the dark about his own sexuality, forcing him into incredible discomfort when he encounters a sexual situation. It’s unfortunate and upsetting that the first time he would begin to consider his sexual project is only when he’s made to feel thoroughly uncomfortable because of it, and *Bojack Horseman* as a show does an incredible job highlighting this societal failure.

The show also excels at showcasing the potential consequences of underdeveloped sexual projects, especially in the case of asexuality. Todd’s lack of a sexual project, combined with the effect of sexual geographies, almost leads him to being sexually assaulted. The closet in S3E2 and a hotel room he and Emily find themselves in in S3E5 have specific sexual connotations. Here the show also does a wonderful job of showcasing the power of location and social influence. Bojack, the titular character of the show, notices midway through a party that Emily still has feelings for Todd. Trying to do a good turn for his friend, he gives Todd his hotel room key and encourages them to use it. He assumes that Todd, a male, would appreciate any kind of sexual interaction, and this assumption unwittingly leads his friend towards a potential sexual

assault. Luckily, the show also does an effective job at showcasing what a responsive partner looks like in Emily. She desires sex, but she also notices Todd's discomfort. She clearly and directly asks for consent and, upon not receiving it, ends the interaction. But Todd, not providing -- and truthfully not fully knowing -- his reason for the lack of desire, leaves her hurt and confused.

But what really ties together this portrayal of asexuality is how the show integrates it into Todd's character. He doesn't begin to explore his sexual identity until season 3, a full 24 episodes after we first meet the character. This choice adds two major strengths to the show overall. First, it paints a portrait of a more realistic human being, someone who grows, develops, and changes throughout his life. And second, it forces those unacquainted with the concept of asexuality to reckon with it in a character they're already familiar with. This in turn helps to solidify asexuality not as a trait that defines our perception of people, but one that makes up an important part *of* those people. Todd is not just an "asexual". The show leads us to understand that he is a person who defines himself as asexual. This important distinction is made effectively and naturally.

The timing of an introduction, however, is not enough to create an effective portrayal of asexuality. The circumstances surrounding and the response to that introduction matter just as much. Luckily, *Bojack Horseman* seems to excel in this too (with one qualification). So let's take a look at the response Todd receives when he realizes and announces his sexual identity. His friends, luckily, are surprised but encouraging. They may not fully understand the idea -- and this lack of understanding is played for a few jokes -- but they're earnest in their acceptance of it. There is no fantastic revelation, no over the top drama, no hatred, and no criticism. Todd navigates a process of uncertainty, learns to accept who he is, and his friends follow suit. This

could be viewed, however, as an aspect where the show falls short in depicting asexuality. *Bojack Horseman*, to me, seems to pride itself on depicting the sometimes harsh realities of personal and social relationships. But in Todd's case, it presents a version of reality that is perhaps a bit more accepting of asexuality than ours is. There are still many people today who refuse to believe in or accept individuals that identify as asexual, and we don't see that represented in the show. That's not to say that Todd's journey is easy, but if there's one area in which the show would stand to improve, it would be in more accurately depicting the difficulties in acceptance that many asexual individuals face.

The biggest strength of the character, however, lies in his imperfection. Efforts to introduce underrepresented character types in media run the risk of idolization, of creating "perfect" people that those who embody the identity represented cannot relate to. *Bojack Horseman* deftly avoids this pitfall of tokenism by highlighting both Todd's strengths as well as his flaws. He's an incredibly kind individual but also a bit slow on the uptake. He's driven, but more so by ridiculous business ideas than by what might be considered more "noble" pursuits. He strives to help others, but also struggles with finding a direction in life. These flaws are just as important as his strengths because they help to craft a realistic human being, not a washed out portrayal of what a show might want an asexual individual to be. He's not a token meant to score social points. He's a flawed individual who's proud to have asexuality be a part of his identity, and that kind of nuance can be hard to come by.

In sum, *Bojack Horseman* strikes an incredible balance in depicting asexuality. It vests this identity in a character that is truly human, a person with flaws who nonetheless strives to be good. Though it may not quite capture some of the harsh realities of asexual acceptance in our society, it refrains from treating the sexual orientation as if it were out of the ordinary, as if it

were something special to be celebrated or something terrible to be condemned. That's not to say, however, that the show supports the idea that celebrating the introduction of a marginalized character impedes the societal effort to view those identities as "normal". Rather, it takes one step beyond this notion by introducing a nuanced character that people can relate to. For those whose sexual orientation is important, but wish for perception of themselves to extend beyond it, Todd Chavez is an important milestone in our media. Yes, he is laid back. He's whimsical, determined, always failing upwards. Yes, he is asexual. But, above all, he is human, and if a show can get you to believe that of a fictional character, then it has done a very good job indeed.