



## ***Ugly Betty*: A (Post) Feminist Ideology Critique**

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### **Research Article**

#### **Abstract**

*ABC's female-led global phenomenon Ugly Betty (2006-2010) feeds into and critiques America's neoliberal capitalist makeover culture, which regulates female bodies and says that women can only have success, new opportunities, and a place in society if they exercise, diet, and invest in beauty products and fashion. Even the script for the pilot episode declares that "Amanda's a knockout who's had to work at it: tireless hours at the gym, dermatologist. Jenny Craig" (Horta 2005:14). Women who have makeovers, maintain them, and can repeatedly purchase consumer goods are expected to feel empowered and confident as if announcing that they have made it, have it all, are liberated, superior, and answer to no-one—except the beauty industry. Academy Award nominee America Ferrera helms a show where wealthy women of all colours mock and poverty-shame the marginalised, disadvantaged and ethnic minorities who cannot afford self-improving-through-grooming; have basic living conditions; lack a job or work all hours; and cannot be a perfect mother and employee in New York City. Lacking a voice, they cannot defend themselves. However, by widening representation and championing a multiplicity of identities, Ugly Betty, "the most adapted TV series [and] most popular telenovela of all time" (Tato-Pazo 2015: 330) challenges structural inequalities by making women's poverty visible on screen and offering a commentary on the postfeminist linkage of commodities and self-esteem. Indeed, there is a homogenisation and othering of the predominantly white models, whose vacant expressions and indistinguishable outfits liken them to automatons or 'angels of the house' with the lights on and no one home. Betty, the prototypical 'messy' televisual millennial woman, finds alternative ways of being beautiful, happy, and achieving her ambitions, and refuses to reduce feminism to a new pair of shoes and gaining "access to power" via her body and "credit cards" (Sheridan-Rabideau 2009: 7).*

**Keywords:** *Fashion, Feminism, Post feminism, Television, Beauty, Adaptations, Resilience.*

#### **Introduction**

*Ugly Betty* does exactly what Angela McRobbie calls for by giving us access to the decision-makers who commission *MODE* magazine. Exposing what goes on in patriarchal media institutions, we see how editorial decisions are arrived at, how they marry with the need for advertising revenue, and how they inform—and we internalise—social and gender norms. Visibly and palpably exclusive to that demographic of 'ordinary' women who pick up a copy of the latest style magazine, the stylist Christina tells her group of average-looking friends: "Perfect sells fashion. It's all fake and unobtainable but nobody seems to get it". As she gorges on a roll, she asks: "Would you buy a magazine if I were on the cover?" We see tech wizards narrow hips, remove cellulite, and enlarge breasts. These out-of-reach beauty ideals further depress the *MODE* women. As one black woman puts it, "If they ever got their hands on me, I'd look like a pre-crack Whitney!" Asan 'imperfect' Betty stands in front of a mirror and places a cut-out of a woman's eye and threaded eyebrows rows over her own, she tells her father she was never beautiful and that "I work in an office full of Glamazon women who are six feet tall and perfectly waxed". In this episode, the fashion industry enters crisis mode as a movie star's



unedited photos are leaked. Scandal is ultimately avoided when *MODE* releases the un-retouched versions first. The magazine turns the ‘disaster’ to its advantage and gains readers by being seen as pro-inclusion. Is this a signifier of feminist impact or a cultural shift? Or is it a cynical ploy to control feminism? *MODE* either genuinely embraces transformation *or* this is an empty gesture that creates the *illusion* of wanting change to monetise the body-positive and fat-liberation movement. The beauty industry is always on the lookout for aspects of feminist campaigns and mobilisations of the body that make it look as though it is fulfilling corporate responsibility requirements. Paying lip service whilst flaunting lip fillers, *MODE*’s stunt engenders a boost in magazine sales. All future issues reinforce the status quo.

Sharon Lamb argues in *Packaging Girlhood* that audiences see the power one gets by being a model, and counters McRobbie’s position by calling advertisers too “smart” to create impossible female ideals: “Even as they present an ideal girl, they make her appealingly vulnerable and offer aspects of her image to every girl with the purchase of an accessory” (Lamb 2007: 4). You too can become a model in installments—a handbag here, a glove there. Identity is thus reduced to an image. More money is spent on the *image* of so-called ‘girl power’ than on activities, initiatives, and/or guidance to truly empower women. Girl power therefore “means the power to make choices while shopping” (Lamb 2007: 4). However, a woman’s ‘choice’ to buy clothes or beauty goods is rarely her own. It is guided by consumerist ideology, which promises to liquidate all lacks. Marketers sell women a ‘better’ version of themselves, call it ‘retail therapy’, and make it addictive to women, knowing it makes them feel better. Diane Negra proposes that “postfeminist culture [...] naturalise[s]” the “figure of a woman as empowered consumer” and “elevates consumption as a strategy for healing” (Negra 2007: 2). Humanity follows and is more easily managed by its desire to feel happy. Magazines sell happiness—even as they replicate inequalities and devalue female labour and perspectives—and package it as the dream of living our ‘best life’. *MODE*’s Amanda wants a rabbit skirt because everyone else wants this ‘it’ item. Having it is bliss yet her satisfaction is fleeting and compels her to keep climbing chains of desire. *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* uses the example of Coca-Cola. We drink it, feel full, and then feel empty because joy has slipped away from us. Shopping is, for Amanda, a compulsive lifelong pursuit of ‘the real thing’.

“24.Overweight. Bushy unibrow. Coke bottle glasses. Hairspray caked bangs. If beauty is defined by symmetry, Betty looks like a bomb went off at Disney Hall” (Horta 2005: 1). These are the first words of the pilot episode script. Scene One others Betty, as she waits to be invited upstairs to interview at Meade Publications (*MOD* Emagazine is a nod to *Vogue*). Betty’s endearing first words, “I like your poncho”, are directed at a glamorous model that the script calls an Amazon, who says five words: “Milan. Dolce & Gabbana. Fall”. For Betty to make small talk about *fashion* is laughable; yet, to her mind, the *haute-couture* poncho mirrors the one her father bought in Guadalajara and is a positive reminder of her beloved Mexican heritage. As Betty sees it, ponchos are not worn for comedic value; they are fashion icons and bridge cultural divides and make genuine connections. And yet Betty’s abject face is a barrier: “She smiles [with] a mouth full of metal. The HR Guy stares at her like a bug” (Horta 2005: 1) and sends her away. CEO Bradford Meade ultimately hires Betty after she shows her passion and business acumen. To try to make a positive impression on her first day, Betty wears *her* poncho. As in *The Devil Wears Prada*, the self-absorbed Amanda asks if Betty is the “before or after” and, very slowly, if she is “de-liv-er-ing something”. We may “laugh” in these “post ‘politically-correct’ times” (Sheridan-Rabideau 2009: 7) Rather than believe that Betty cannot understand English, given the self-conscious irony that Betty is multilingual. When Betty admits that “this is my first real job”, Amanda sarcastically hints that *she* applied first: “[F]unny. I was told I didn’t have enough



experience”. Amanda’s tacit assumption is that Betty is a ‘diversity hire’. Betty then walks headfirst into a glass wall, symbolic of her career, naïvely unaware that her poncho frames her as an outsider, ignorant of fashion, resistant to fitting in, and the buttofracist jokes. Employees think *every* Mexican woman is Betty and that she is a “cleaning lady”. Betty also loses faith in meritocracy when told that Bradford chose her not on skill alone but so the “man-whore” Editor-in-Chief, Daniel (Eric Mabius) will work, never tempted to sleep with her. Betty not only *feels* but is *told* that she is ugly.

### A (Post) Feminist Ideology Critique of *Ugly Betty*

Betty carries that heavy signifier ‘ugly’ like an anchor for four series. A Betty is a babe. An ugly babe is a perversion of the idiom. Marc St. James calls her “the bizarro version of *Sex and the City*” (S1E1) and Carrie Bradshaw makes it big in the city, and dehumanises her: “It’s *MODE*, not *DogFancy*”. Betty Suarez is the beauty and the beast in one complicated body. Even her surname translates as child of a pig (‘suarius’). Daniel agrees to crush her “to a pulp” and convinces her to quit without an unfair dismissal lawsuit. Given incessant errands *and* the silent treatment, she watches Daniel’s flat at night, on the street, and calls each time a woman arrives, so he can sneak out his last conquest. Loyal to a fault, she misses her father’s birthday party. Even Daniel looks guilty—momentarily. The final straw is at a photo-shoot, when she replaces a model with the same skin tone. Betty squeezes into a latex outfit (Fig. 1), her face as hen, and lips petted. Betty, the ‘imperfect’ woman, conveys dissatisfaction and exhaustion with contemporary postfeminist imperatives to be confident. Sandwiched between models in tight uniforms, she leans forward suggestively, unnaturally, nervously and painfully. Betty is losing this competition of femininity. With her hand on her hip, and her back arched to display her breasts, she looks as if she has injured her back. They all laugh at this model employee who tries to please everyone. Crushed, she flees the building and covers her exposed body with her arms, as if violated. Lacking “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 1975: 1), she cannot endure the male gaze. And yet Betty reclaims her strength by looking at Daniel implacably and roars: “This is what you wanted, isn’t it? To humiliate me and make me quit? God forbid you had to work with the ugly girl your Dad forced you to hire!” The unspoken truth is spoken and Daniel experiences consciousness-raising by re-evaluating his commodification of women.



Two simultaneous makeovers that polarise Betty (ridiculous) and Wilhelmina (regal) enact class barriers and an “increasingly fractured and splintered society” (McRobbie 2020: 1) in which Betty cannot satisfy neoliberalism’s demands for women to be thin, attractive, *and*



professional successes. Betty asks to look like a woman in a magazine and is in agony as her eyebrows are waxed by the cut-price Jolie. Wilhelmina Slater enjoys having her eyebrows threaded by high-end Jean-Luc. Betty is pinned down during a pedicure and haircut, chokes on hairspray, and resists change. Wilhelmina has champagne, a massage, and, back at *MODE*, is a vision: hair in a chignon, makeup flawless. Betty is a caricature: fake hair and Jungle-Red nails with crystals. Her face is awash with makeup, she staggers like Bambi, or a Mexican Pretty Woman in high heels. Betty feels glamorous when Jolie says “Baby, you look better” than the magazine woman, and can see no obvious differences. The salon applauds and construction workers wolf-whistle. Her lime miniskirt, coloured flowery blouse, black leather jacket, and gold handbag are the antithesis of Wilhelmina’s all-white ensemble. Non-diegetic music by Shakira plays, accentuating this ‘sexy’ hyper-Latina’s confidence as she struts to Manhattan. However, as she enters *MODE* and passes models, Betty is barely as tall as their shoulders. Wilhelmina announces, “It looks as if Queens threw up”. Betty’s neighbourhood restyles her in their image, only for the magic to wear off when she crosses the literal borderline into Manhattan and her shoe falls off (like Cinderella). Wilhelmina mocks Betty, and stands beside a large mock-up of the upcoming *MODE* issue (Fig. 2). Feeling her hair, she muses: “Sometimes change is a positive thing”. Implied is that she has achieved a luxurious, desirable, feminine appearance. Indirectly drawing attention to the difference between herself and Betty, she adds: “Sometimes are design can spin out of control [...] Bold new colours, a daring look”. As she points at the enlarged cover (and thus Betty), she cruelly concludes: “the truth is you haven’t improved on a thing”. Betty’s eyes fill with tears as the designers laugh at Betty for “mak[ing] a bad situation even worse” and spending money on an amateur instead of a pro. Blamed as the victim of her own bad choices, Daniel looks awkward and says “I don’t know what I’m supposed to tell you”. He still cannot see her as beautiful. Indeed, the first time they meet he catches himself commenting on what “big teeth” Betty has, like the Big Bad Wolf.

**Oh, honey, you gotta stop. Somehow you got it in your head that this is your story. But you got to let that go. It’s time to come up with a whole new story for yourself. You are who you are, and the sooner you’re OK with that, the sooner you see what I see, the happier you’ll be. I swear to God. (Hilda Suarez S4E16 ‘All the World’s a Stage’)**

The final episode opens with a recap, which responds to Betty’s identity crisis: “You are not the same person I met three years ago. Betty, you’ve already changed. But you’re still you”. This mirrors American reality-makeover TV where “Before-bodies often lack valid me-ness and After-bodies mark the zone of celebrated selfhood where subjects rejoice, ‘I’m me now!’ Such exclamations beg the question: ‘Who were you before, if not you?’” (Weber 2009: 7). As Luz Maria Tato-Pazo puts it, “With her makeover, she becomes who she really should have been from the very beginning” (Tato-Pazo 2015: 339). Hilda Suarez, quoted above, addresses the Before-Betty and After-Betty and tells her to reject life scripts assigned to her. Be at peace with who you are and how you look and fulfil your potential. These are not trite and empty self-help clichés, but loving advice from a sister. Betty has for years felt lost and in the dark, unaware that she has emerged from the chrysalis: beautiful inside and outside. Sleek, with tidy—not frizzy—hair, her eyebrows trimmed and braces removed, a more refined and wiser Betty comes to the fore. Her appearance complements her Mexican-ness rather than eliminates it. As with Salma Hayek, Betty is a self-assured, fashionable, Latina. When Betty then hallucinates at *MODE*, Betty in Season 4 sees and is contrasted with Betty in Season 1—wide-eyed, smiling, waving at her in that poncho, and walking into that glass. This scene actualises Hilda’s prayer (above). The experienced After-Betty says goodbye to and assimilates the former Betty. She is moving on but



not letting go of her past completely because young Betty made her who she is today. As viewers, we know that this is a farewell from the writers and an attempt to wrap up the series and gesture towards healing and closure.

All 85 episodes move “From Poncho to Honcho” (as the Season 4 tagline puts it). Betty changes how she looks not because she wants to feel belonging and acceptance but as a result of finding an interest in and experimenting with fashion and learning what works for her. Although the gradual transformation in appearance is a signifier of her personal evolution and financial success, she refuses an inauthentic style that compromises who she is; and her self-esteem is predicated on her bond with her family, not beauty products and punishing self-monitoring regimes. Yes, it *is* true that “Hilda” is “confident and fashionable [and] Salma Hayek, producer of the series, cameos on the show [as] Sofia Reyes, a powerful and sexy magazine editor” (Barreiro 2010: 34). True to the messiness of human life, various characters are complicated and more substance than style, or are *all* sign and no substance. When Hilda comes downstairs in a green facemask, she asks Daniel: “What? You think beautiful just happens?” It takes effort to be gorgeous. Her clever and playful commentaries on how exhausting is to be enslaved by female beauty products uncouple her appearance from her identity and hint at depth insofar as Hilda uses beauty rituals as psychological retrieval cues for memories of youth. Carrying carried by the memory of her loving mother, Rosa, Betty’s face is full of love and hurt as a montage of life with her mother (baking and laughing) is projected onto the wall, as part of Betty’s campaign to land the *Fabia* cosmetics account. Daniel calls it “beautiful”, and is moved because this poignant moment hints at the universal human experience of loss and navigating one’s life without parents. Matriarch Claire Meade bonds with Betty after she sees her love for her mother (her guiding principle). When Claire says, “your mother would want you to be happy”, she allays all fears of disappointing Rosa (“getting it wrong”). Betty hopes that her mother will never be forgotten, and healing begins.

Many meaningful confessional exchanges challenge social injustices and neoliberal assaults on forgotten women. As one example, Daniel Meade enters Betty’s home for the first time to apologise. His culture shock is apparent. Bhabha would call this estranging space a liminal contact zone or Third Space of Enunciation, in which Daniel (the mainstream) and Betty (the margins) engage and are altered by mediation. Surrounded by South American and Catholic artefacts, and photographs of Mexican relatives, Daniel looks lost in this house with different colours on each wall. He finally sees that Betty has too many plates spinning; that there is a stark disparity between them; and that Betty was pushed to her breaking point. She yells that Daniel’s only concern is which of his many Manhattan townhouses he will use to sleep with a new woman each night, while she stays on the phone at all hours to ask HMO to cover her father’s heart medication. Women such as Betty are most likely to hold down inflexible low-wage jobs that are needed for the country to function. Having quit, she fears her neighbours will mislabel her as a wastrel or scrounger: comfort eating, and stuffing her mouth with flan. Betty has the unpaid responsibility of caring for her father, whether at work or not. When Ignacio is later hospitalised, we see the devastating impact of withdrawing social care and “a compassionate welfare ethos” (McRobbie 2020: 3) from vulnerable, marginal citizens. Daniel *bears* Betty’s anxieties and, rather than tell her to snap out of it and bounce back, says: “I promise you, things will be different this time”. Demonstrating sincerity, he moves towards a place of healing and acceptance. Compassion is a bridge for characters with oppositional class, racial, and gender identities. The series is a transnational success because of the lives of ‘messy’ millennials who are imperfect but who are constantly evolving, growing and becoming.

McRobbie’s P-I-R defines ‘perfect’ in its current configuration, as slim, successful and



satisfied at work, with a healthy, happy family, in a setting that is conducive to wellbeing. At the same time, the media encourages women to expose their vulnerabilities and imperfections. The imperfect has emerged to dilute the relentless demands of neoliberal leadership feminisms. The imperfect tempers that impossible demand to be perfect. *Every* woman fails to live up to the perfect. Hilda's words "They're not gonna change. *You* have to" lead me to ask: can P-I-R accommodate characters that *never* change? Fat Carol still sells secrets to other magazines. Gina Gambaro always manipulates men. Charlie gets pregnant to steal Henry from Betty. Mean Girl Kimmie Keegan (Lindsay Lohan) never apologises for being who she is: pure evil. Marc's mother rejects him forever when he announces, "I'm gay", and is never seen again. Michael Urie says the lack of acceptance, true to the experience of many homosexuals, has made his "imperfect" character resilient. (GMA. 'Ugly Betty Cast Reunion') To give a final example: hedonistic, self-destructive and emotionally chaotic receptionist Helen (Kristen Johnston) embodies what Mary Russo's essay designates as 'The Scandal of Anachronism' in refusing to act her age. Helen spends the day hungover, bemoans her hard life, pretends she is still thirty, and ignores the phone—"the cherry on top of the pill bottle". When Wilhelmina barks "I need a town car!", Helen responds, "Don't we all, honey?" and carries on looking in a mirror to put lipstick on her "hastily-stitched-together face". Helen is fired and called "a giant mess", yet processes the news and recovers quickly: "I've been sleeping under a turntable at *Butter*". She cries, eats cheese puffs, and says "It's OK. Sometimes DJ Omar puts a pillow out for me". Amanda fears that she will *be* Helen—penniless and homeless—and worries for her future. The collective reaction to Helen's joblessness presents hers as a cautionary tale, which helps to produce a new moral economy where women must achieve the bottom-line status of being in work. Helen is a reminder of how not acting your age invites pity and claims of being inappropriate, and of how resilience training goes hand-in-hand with poverty- and welfare-shaming. That is, being on benefits is seen as shameful; and the public excoriation of Helen's many forms of dependency buttresses neoliberalism's call for the evisceration of welfare. Indeed, when Amanda admits that she is terrified of being on the scrap heap, she tells Helen to see tough times as opportunities for personal growth. Helen must adopt a Zen-like acceptance of her undesirable economic uncertainty. The idea of an ageing drunk who "can only see out of the left corner of my right eye" bouncing back into employment through determination or mindfulness is troubling. The imperfect (jobless) is in binary relation to the perfect (Top Girl).

The media celebrates minorities when they become Top Girls. Betty is fêted at the Black and Latina Organization of Bloggers. Undoing the marginalization and exclusion of overlooked people working in services, the audience consists primarily of Hispanics, lesbians, and cleaners, albeit called "freaks" and "outcasts". When Betty posts complaints about Daniel online to her fellow bloggers, she feeds into the 'Am I being unreasonable?' feedback culture that turns distress about inequalities in labour division into funny suggestions. Alerts are sent to Daniel's computer whenever his name appears online. He reflects on how P-I-R is a mechanism to control women and reinforce longstanding norms. As McRobbie argues, "The new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom" (McRobbie 2004: 260). Betty calls out a toxic culture and articulates strength online in the face of workplace bullying. She agitates for change but is ordered to retract her statements and apologise because it is classically impossible for anyone other than white males to be P-I-R 'perfect' or fully successful, and Betty has threatened his reputation. Meanwhile, Daniel is made to confront his privilege and recognise that he sabotaged the video for her nomination (ruining her "polished, put-together, professional" image) as he is threatened by her success. Daniel hands out the award



and says, “Betty has done more in three-and-a-half years than I have done in my entire life”. His new-found awareness aligns with the P-I-R model’s positive aspects (social critique and subjecting the forces of power to a forensic examination) and its innovation potential (McRobbie 2020: 8). We encounter critical crosscurrents as Daniel tentatively grasps that he (to paraphrase Robin James) “normalises the sexist, racist damage traditional white supremacist patriarchy inflicts on [...] people of colour” (James 2015: 7). And yet there is a dual unsettling and repetition of worn-out stereotypes as Betty is lauded for overcoming (gender) oppression, but then rendered a mouthpiece for *MODE* as a *celebrity* role model and beacon of what Jorie Llargerwey calls “particularly female resilience” (2016: Web). Consequently, Daniel defangs the feminist backlash from an audience throwing burritos at him, undermines it as a threat, and makes the event profitable for his magazine by promoting it and rerouting and repurposing the calls for social change demanded by the ‘BLOBBY’ feminists.

Anti-capitalist feminisms that question representations of women in popular culture were partly inspired by TV and magazines idealising “female success, in work, in family life, in self and in body” (McRobbie 2020: 48), and demanding that women become role models. Meade Publications tells Betty in Season Three that she is inspirational but they cannot afford the promotion that she deserves. While she is barely able to rent a filthy Manhattan apartment in a run-down neighbourhood (her American pie is going stale) and so must work longer to maintain her lifestyle, the egotistical billionaire Cal Hartley throws money at *MODE*, lays off and rehires all of the former employees on a reduced salary, and escalates wealth inequalities and limits social mobility by transferring power from the workers to him. This tyrant oligarch abuses Claire Meade, controls the direction of the magazine and, by buying up the media industry (by stealth and deception), intensifies negative views of the corporate donor class.

Neoliberal capitalism’s deleteriousness is evident as Betty has to work more hours to cover her living expenses. Wage stagnation and increased costs engender a pause on hiring new staff in this version of New York City. This is why Hilda dissuades Betty from pursuing a dream job in publishing: “The job market is crazy [...] Horrible pay. Slaving away for hours. No time for family, friends, relationships” (S1E1). Motherhood and working hours deny Hilda new skills and qualifications to escape her social entrapment. Angela McRobbie argues that “poor, working-class women [and] ethnic minorities” need visibility and that un/employed characters such as Hilda must be heard because paid work is vital for “status and identity” (McRobbie 2020: 3). The affluent have the luxury of “choice”. Todo as they please and being able to juggle family and career are “markers of female success” (3). Society expects Hilda to be an exemplary mother and worker, despite having no free time or money. In her neighbourhood, the work/life balance is a myth. The only realistic job I saw was Herbalux supplement saleswoman. Nevertheless, if you select a ‘socially unacceptable’ job, then your poverty is your fault, at least according to a judgemental society that ostensibly traps women in low-paid positions to belittle them and to expose ‘bad’ women and mothers who cannot balance work and life.

McRobbie’s model of the triple incarceration of women accounts for Hilda’s despair: (1) the media and society treat being a single mother and a woman with few qualifications as a personal weakness and a moral failing, and so reinforce Hilda’s ‘shameful’ class position; (2) she is trapped in low-paid jobs with no prospect of promotion and/or more money; and (3) being a carer on a zero-hour contract gives her no time to look for courses and education, which are already fee-based and exorbitantly high in New York. (Jo Littler) This is why, inspired by Betty’s success, she created her home salon—Hilda’s Beautilities. Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean-In feminism is one prescription for women who lower their achievement expectations because “self-confidence” and “ambition” are seen as the preserve of men, whereas women “violate unwritten



rules [of] social conduct” by being “hard-charging” (Sandberg 2013: 17). Sandberg teaches women to adopt a fake-it-’til -you-make-it mentality and unlearn views of ambition as optional and negative. Her central argument is that instead of “raising our hands”, women are “pulling back when we should be leaning in” (Sandberg 2013: 7) being “ambitious in any pursuit” (Sandberg 2013: 10), and unafraid to be forthright and outspoken. However, McRobbie critiques Sandberg’s managerial feminism, which targets women who are already high achievers. Media and popular culture call for resilience in times of austerity, and Sandberg speaks of tightening the belt, but she “never mentors her cleaner and gets her into the boardroom” (Jilly Kay) or explains how to Lean in if you are unemployed or self-employed and thus the only one in the room. The unappreciated are simply told to smile and sit up at work.

The P-I-R, as we have seen, illuminates the gendered expectation for women to be resilient and approach life like Betty: “You’re always so good, strong, determined, optimistic. Just like your mother was”. The ‘imperfect’ Betty is the hero of her own story, is socially and politically conscious, has adventures across America (abseiling and mountain climbing) and returns feeling upbeat and re-energised. However, the father from whom she should draw support tells her to wake up and calls her naïve, overly optimistic and childish for assuming life will work out for her as long as she tries her hardest. Her enthusiasm becomes a point of attack and Betty is criticised as a silly little girl for having any ambitions. Ignacio frequently recounts his great tale of coming to America penniless but in love. All Betty wants is to rent a flat in the same city she is in now. Is that so unrealistic? While Ignacio’s patriarchal assumption is that she cannot live and/or succeed without him, Betty asks for support but *never* permission. Likewise in S4E12 (‘Blackout’), Marc is fed up with her go-getter attitude and faith in the world: “I reached above my means [...] because of you. I thought what would Betty do? She’d be all ‘reach for the stars!’ [...] I’ve had it up to here with your optimism!”. Ignacio and Marc through their pessimism and efforts to silence Betty confirm that we need intersectional collective feminist practices that expose and challenge neoliberalism’s effects on women and minorities (‘the help’) in particular. Betty is bewildered by the double address: be resilient and reject resilience. She tries to help and now feels helpless, alone, and guilty. Aptly, Betty and women generally are taught by visual media to berate themselves. They all stand before mirrors and criticize aspects of their appearances: “I’m so fat” and “I’m a mess”. A psychoanalytic-feminist critique of the *MODE* women might concentrate on how female subjects are acculturated into an addictive self-disparagement and generate pleasure from the attendant repetition and (comforting or even enjoyable) familiarity. Resilience itself is treated as a “therapy device” (McRobbie 2020: 63) that “pro-capitalist” ideologies have used to stifle feminist ideology critiques and redirect discontentment towards the individual and self-care. Weight Watchers and cereal brands have built an entire industry on identifying ‘faults’ in the female body. Love-Your-Body products offer to restore the feel-good factor to women’s lives and boost the perception of their bodies. Normalisations of the view that women automatically hate their bodies find expression in *Ugly Betty*, where every female is urged to constantly work on herself to develop her resilience skills (interchangeable with empowerment). The rules are in flux, however, as Betty is derided for being in/dependent *and* ir/responsible. In her cocoon of gender ideologies, she is both an abject failure and a success (her career is a path to freedom).

Betty’s belief that she inhabits a postfeminist and post-racial world is tested when she hears of and applies for the highly competitive YETI internship 48 hours before the deadline. The Young Editors Training Institute accepts one assistant per magazine. I argue that Betty earns her place by creating her comprehensive feminist *B Magazine* in one night. Filled with iconic, professional, independent women, it tells all girls and women to live each day inspired.





The female judges are impressed by its consciousness-raising function, and one, in particular, gives an encouraging look of acknowledgement, approval, and admiration, and nods and smiles during her interview pitch. Nevertheless, Betty is alarmed to see Marc St. James competing. His celeb sponsors, Mark and James, know the judge and attend his interview along with a team of *MODE* employees. Betty came alone, with no sponsor or letter of recommendation from a business insider. Vitally, Betty beats Marc (his interview is off-screen). As they are evaluated individually, Betty assumes that they “liked my concept better” and chose her because she “wanted it” more. Marc asks, “Do you *really* think that what you did in *two days* is better than what I spent three *months* working on?” He either assumes or somehow knows: “You helped them meet their quota [...] they picked you, Betty Suarez of Queens, because you are Latina [and] a token ethnic girl”. Betty is aghast, shakes her head incredulously and calls that “the ugliest” thing he has ever said to her. Marc defiantly states, “it’s the truth” and feels a victim of this Affirmative Action. Although Betty believes in equality, and that she overcomes obstacles with grit, not melatonin (she has never factored in her race), she fears Marc may be right. When Ignacio and Hilda surprise her at work with a candlelit cake and party poppers, she is, for the first time, hyper-aware of their ethnicity, and drags the minto a private office, embarrassed by their Spanglish version of ‘For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow’: “*Felicitate*, Betty. Just got into YETI!”. Betty asks them to hush, whispering: “I called and [YETI] didn’t exactly deny” that she *is* a statistic. Hilda advises her to “take every advantage you can in this life”. After all, she wears her “tightest tank top” and *always* gets to the front of the butcher-shop queue thanks to “the pointer sisters” (her cleavage). Ignacio adds, “If being Mexican helped this time, take it”. Yet Betty has made up her mind: “No, Papi. I wanted to be accepted because I earned it”. Betty makes a moral decision to turn down the offer and hands Marc a letter for the program: “You’re in. You were right [...] I dropped out”. Her sacrifice generates healing and unity. Betty feels she is righting a wrong. Although Marc tells Betty he would “take” her “advantage” and “run with it”, he concedes Betty’s point that as “a gay man in the fashion industry” he has “plenty of advantages”. Marc is comically handed backstage Madonna passes and so insists he lacks an edge *outside* of the world of fashion. He accepts the offer before Betty changes her mind. Ultimately, Daniel rides to the rescue (a white saviour) by contacting YETI and submitting a six-page letter to confirm that she was once his assistant at Meade’s laddish *Player Magazine*. Betty and Marc are thus eligible for the apprenticeship, and all talk of policies that rebalance inequalities faced by women and minorities disappears.

The hyper-competitive cutthroat female workplace replaces the female community with *The Hunger Games*. The resilience of one woman competes with the resilience of another, and Betty encounters “competitive femininity” (McRobbie 2020: 3) on her last day at YETI. Media maven, Jodie Papadakis (Bernadette Peters) declares: “I lost my 401K, my cat died, and I keep hitting on gay gays. It’s been a crappy year”. Starring in five episodes as a guru, she *steals* a *New York Review* editorship from Betty, and so defies second-wave feminist calls for solidarity and sisterhood. Against patriarchal scripts that tell ambitious women they are dangerous and must retire and be invisible, Papadakis—a “genius” who rose “from assistant to CEO in five years”—unapologetically prioritizes herself and refuses to step aside for the next generation. Papadakis is excoriated by Betty (who passed the interview), but rejects the accusation of stealing her job: “I just convinced them to hire me instead”. Papadakis *has* to re-enter a competitive and insecure job market, anxious about the future. As she says in her first scene, “The magazine business is dying [...] Do you give up or do you toughen up?” (S3E11). Papadakis answers the gendered call to bounce-back-ability and negotiates a salary so high that the magazine cannot afford *two* new junior editors. Betty feels betrayed by her YETI mentor, who never explains her rationale (why



should she?). In a witchy dress that reinforces how older women are cast as deceitful, self-serving and evil, Papadakis asks, “Do you know how hard it was to sit back and let some cheery girl take what I’d always dreamed of my whole career?” Once more we see “the postfeminist heroine is vital, youthful and playful while [...] the ‘bad’ female professional is repressive, deceptive, and deadly” (Negra 2007: 9). Papadakis is fed up “of helping other people get what they want” and asks, “Who says I’m done?”. Pivotaly, Betty ends the conversation by saying: “I guess you aren’t”. Every woman fails to live up to the ‘perfect’ in Angela McRobbie’s model of the intricate networks of power relations: the appropriately titled Perfect-Imperfect-Resilience *dispositif*.

## Conclusion

Neoliberalism and postfeminism make a unified clarion call to females, akin to *The Matrix*: “The war is over!” Put down your weapons and return to your lives. In reality, capacious and searching feminisms *are still* needed, in an age where calls to adventure and emancipation have become calls to a hairdresser. Rather than abandon ideas of resilience and responsibility, Betty reroutes them to question powerful individuals and (mismanaged) corporations that hurt others. Instead of a complete demolition of ideas of resilience, often used to keep women biddable and compliant, I proposed that feminist potential can be excavated and recuperated. Rosalind Gill examines how women are asked to believe they are not held back “by patriarchal capitalism or institutionalised sexism, but by [a] lack of confidence [...] unconnected to structural inequalities or cultural forces” (Gill 2016: 3). Magazines such as *MODE* re-inscribe gendered thinking and co-opt vulnerabilities of women who believe they have lost resilience. The beauty/fashion industry preserves gender stereotypes and makes compliance enjoyable, but *Ugly Betty*’s non-standard characters are wonderfully irregular. Betty finds healing not by becoming a beauty or leaning in at work but by checking out. Finally putting herself first, she escapes the unrelenting world of female self-assessment and makes a difference for girls and future generations. Praised for being an entrepreneurial risk-taker, she achieves her dream of running her feminist magazine in London. If marketers can reach female minds, so can multifarious feminisms, which can reclaim that cultural power and reshape our thinking. Accordingly, there are so many avenues for further discussion, such as how the wider media cultivates images of having it all, and so creates the illusion of overcoming gender inequalities. Marc ‘optimises’ Betty’s photo ID card by digitally altering her face into a blonde white woman with blue eyes. When denied entry at a nightclub, Betty brings to mind and augments Angela McRobbie’s analysis of “liberal-minded white women” that un/knowingly “protect” their “privileged class status” and exclude minorities through “slimness, perfected grooming techniques, designer wardrobes [and] elegant accessories” (McRobbie 2020: 2). When Betty exclaims, “Marc this looks nothing like me!” she communicates a refusal to have an identity assigned to her and perform her sex like a dizzying Hokey-Cokey: blend in, stand out, fake it or get out! The card emblematises patriarchal pressures to be “always optimising” *and* the erasure of ‘invisible’ and ugly women in favour of silent white goddesses, always on display.

Helen at *MODE* is the perfect example of the imperfect. Blonde, white, and ageing, considered grotesque rather than glamorised, and hating and loving herself in equal measure, she seems to stare into what Jia Tolentino conceptualizes as a “trick mirror that carries the illusion of flawlessness as well as the self-flagellating option of always finding fault” (Tolentino 2019: 2). Resilience has become the remedy for the unviability of an idealised version of femininity and cutthroat competition (as we have seen, it is a lucrative business). *Ugly Betty* is a feminist reworking of the patriarchal media industry, foregrounding creative agency and women-centred issues. It presents opportunities for all women, regardless of race, class, and appearance to recover and repair through resilience. It registers an important shift away from postfeminism and



towards *integrating* (not repudiating) aspects of feminism: empowerment, confidence, agency, consciousness-raising, and feminist identification. McRobbie's P-I-R underpins this (post)feminist critique because it, as with *Ugly Betty*, creates a new female subject who disavows feminine stereotypes, not feminism. Betty is constantly 'becoming' and avoids being homogenised, quantified, and pinned down. Butterflies and her 'B' necklace are the through-line for the series and symbolise her freedom and transformation from 'perfect' to 'imperfect' and finally 'resilience'. When Daniel follows her to London and falls in love with her in the last episode, he leaves his position in America because he wants to earn his way in the world: "everything has been handed to me". As Bradford Meade tells Betty, dying in his hospital bed, "You've always kept Daniel on his path". Daniel is enamoured of Betty not purely because she is at last beautiful enough for him, but because of *everything* she has done for him: repeatedly saving his family and their lives. America Ferrera argues that her aesthetics are beside the point: "Salma Hayek pitched the show to me as a woman who enters a fashion magazine and makes everyone beautiful from the inside out" and helps them "heal" by "seeing their value, beyond what's at the surface level". (ATX TV, *Ugly Betty* 10 Year Reunion) In terms of the afterlife of the show, it is fascinating that Fernando Gaitán's *Yosoy Betty, lafeá* (1999-2001) on which *Ugly Betty* is based, is returning to screens, 20 years later, and that Angélica Vale (the star of Mexico's *La Fea Más Bella* (2006-2007)), is Betty Suarez's hygienist and passes on the baton from one Latina feminist to another. That this show is so amenable to adaptation speaks to a need for women to keep telling their stories, about the world over. In every incarnation, the Ugly Betty figures begin their journeys marginalized and without agency, and ultimately find resilience and become editors not only of their own magazines, but of their own lives.

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