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***You're trans-mexi-fying right before our eyes:***  
**Westernized Bodily Features and Beauty Practices in *Ugly Betty***

By Luz-Maria Tato-Pazo<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

Makeover narratives are a form of discourse which relies on some type of transformation as a path to success. These narratives mainly target the bodies of white middle-class and middle-aged heterosexual women with the aim of creating more conventionally beautiful feminine subjects. This article explores the beauty practices and rituals present in the US *dramedy Ugly Betty*. We look in detail at makeover narratives and their close association with contemporary idealized versions of female attractiveness. Closely tied up with the makeover canon, the beauty industry entails processes of disciplining women's bodies to meet the requirements of an ideal feminine being. This regulation of the external appearance is made evident in *Ugly Betty*, suggesting that the adaptation of the self to dominant beauty discourses provides the way to personal and professional success. The thorough exploration of the makeover framework also reveals its linkage with the contradictoriness of neoliberal capitalism and current post-feminist sensibilities. In *Ugly Betty*, we find a vibrant, independent and determined protagonist that fights indefatigably for her dream job but, on the other hand, sexist depictions still persist, such as the continual mockery, disparagement and disregard of women who fail to match the narrow Western expressions of feminine appearance. Such a self-contradictory picture marks one of the contemporary debates of the feminist movement as well.

**Key Words:** Beauty, Makeover, Television, Ugly Betty

**Introduction**

Produced between 1999 and 2001 by Colombia's RCN television, *Yo soy Betty, la fea (I am Betty, the Ugly One)* has become the most adapted TV series and the most popular *telenovela* of all time (Blaine, 2007, p. 240). Broadcast in more than a hundred countries, dubbed into fifteen languages, and with more than twenty versions made in other countries, this worldwide phenomenon has reached virtually every geographical region. The US adaptation, *Ugly Betty*, premiered on ABC in 2006 and ended in 2010 after four seasons and eighty five episodes. This article explores the US version of this soap opera, which itself was purchased for broadcast in a number of countries, almost as many as the original series (Blaine, 2013, p. 36).

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*Ugly Betty* speaks about gaining the rewards of success, recognition and happiness after a long period of ill-treatment, disdain and isolation. This breath of fresh air in the life of the protagonist, Betty Suarez, comes by means of some kind of external transformation. Betty starts to lose weight, style her hair and pluck her bushy eyebrows; also, she gradually develops a sense of style which seems to reach its climax in *Million Dollar Smile*, the last episode of the series in which Betty is freed of her braces (4:17). Advancements in Betty's career seem to progress in parallel to her external transformation in such a way that, at the end of the story, Betty is not only more conventionally beautiful but also has achieved professional recognition and success. Actually, there is a specific scene in this episode which is especially relevant: Betty's braces get caught in a very expensive bra. The plot here reveals a particularly interesting employment of the figurative sense in order to make an original tacit comparison. It could be said that, on the one hand, Betty's orthodontia symbolizes the last signifier of her appearance, class and status and, on the other, that the bra represents the beauty and poise of the fashion industry. According to this allegorical meaning, it could be also argued that, the 'old Betty' (who wore a poncho and braces) finally gets trapped by the world of fashion or, in other words, that fashion finally manages to efface every single 'ugly' feature of Betty. In this way, her braces and the fashion item turn out to be one of the last stylistic devices used by the series' storyline to give an account of Betty's makeover.

*Ugly Betty* can be considered a makeover narrative. These are stories which profoundly rely on the transformation of distinct facets of people's lives as the springboard to personal fulfilment and prosperity. "The makeover has long been a mainstay of advice columns and entertainment literature targeted at women" (Weber, 2009b, p. 1). Transformation regimes have been part of women's lives for a long time, when female shoppers started to be recognized as a crucial component of the consumerist order, coinciding with women's greater presence in the non-domestic labour market and the resulting increase in their purchasing power (Roberts, 2007, pp. 228-229). The makeover paradigm is manifested through various forms of media such as printed journals and magazines, TV shows and electronic sites. Yet in the new millennium, the pervasive presence of audiovisual culture has fostered the propagation of transformation narratives in the specific space of primetime television. As a television format, the makeover turned into a widespread popular phenomenon in 2002, when the American show *Extreme Makeover* began airing. Nowadays the list of makeover TV shows is extensive; from *What Not to Wear*, *10 Years Younger*, *A Makeover Story* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, "which has given new meaning to queering (or not) men, to *Look-a-Like*, *Style Her Famous*, and *I Want a Famous Face*, which make over 'average' people so that they might more closely approximate celebrities" (Weber, 2009b, p. 1). *Ugly Betty* coincides with the advent of the makeover paradigm as a new format for television. It can be included in a moment of greater generalization of these metamorphoses' narratives in the audiovisual media. As a result, the series has effectively taken and adapted to the genre of the soap the most recurrent elements of the transformation discourses.

Makeover narratives target predominantly the bodies of white, middle-class and middle-aged straight women, with the purpose of creating more conventionally feminine subjects. Through the stories of transformation of women's bodies, the makeover genre conveys idealized forms of femininity. In her 2008 study, *The Power of Looks*, Bonnie Berry gives her impressions about current beauty standards. She states that the most accepted (and attached-to-success) looks are those that correspond with a white, Northern European look: "[p]resently, tall, thin, white, blonde, light-eyed people are valued for their looks more than short, dark people" (p. 21).

Correspondingly, this regulation of the feminine through external appearance is made evident in *Ugly Betty*. The series hardly offers alternatives to the preponderance of narrow definitions of the female body attractiveness. Instead, female leading characters such as Amanda Tanen (Becki Newton), Alexis Meade (Rebecca Romijn) and Claire Meade (Judith Light) conform—in one way or another—to the Northern European aesthetic ideal noted above. Betty, who obviously does not correspond to that ideal, is relentlessly ridiculed and made fun of by her co-workers precisely because of her different physical traits (1:01; 2:17; 2:18; 4:04). America Ferrera, the actress who plays the role of Betty, is just the opposite of the generalized pattern mentioned above: she is dark-haired, dark-eyed and dark-skinned. There is one sequence in which the blatant contempt which Marc (personal assistant at *Mode* magazine) and Amanda (the receptionist) have for Betty's racial signifiers is made particularly evident; Amanda shows Marc a series of pictures she has been taking for a week so as to make him realize his physical appearance is deteriorating since he started to work for Daniel (the editor-in-chief). While they look at the pictures, they come across a snapshot of Betty; they both scream in horror and Amanda cries: "oh, my God! oh, my God! Spooky. You're trans-mexi-fying right before our eyes" (4:10 "07.18-07.25").

As the TV series develops, Betty undergoes a series of subtle physical transformation. Her gradual external transformations and her professional achievements occur simultaneously. It is not until the end of the story, when Betty displays a more conventional look, that she gets a promotion which will give her the opportunity to work in London. Yet again, an improved and glamorous outward appearance "functions as a signifier of personal confidence, self-worth, professional competence, and success" (Weber, 2009c, p. 55), which subsequently increases overall happiness and accomplishment. Yet, the stereotyping of certain female bodily features is only one of the various ways in which *Ugly Betty* reproduces what Weber (2009a) has referred to as "normative identity locations of (feminine) gender" (p. 129). As she points out:

[a]cross makeover programming, transformations are largely concerned with writing gender normativity onto primarily female bodies, and, as I've noted, gender is here an umbrella term that imports 'normative' values of race, ethnicity, and class. (p. 168)

This TV series also shows moments in which certain markers of class and race undergo their particular makeover, as they are partially or completely erased. Nevertheless, this topic will be explored later in this work.

### **Beauty Practices: Pleasure or Torture?**

The makeover culture and its modes of operation are full of ambiguities. The very first contradiction involves the seemingly submissive role of women as regards contemporary beauty practices. The fashion and beauty industries are closely tied up with the process of disciplining women's bodies in order to meet the requirements of an idealised femininity. Currently, much of the media tends to portray an extremely thin body ideal. These images pervade all types of communication media; magazines centrefolds, music video clips and the extremely slim shape displayed by a great deal of female TV and film stars emphasize an unrealistic and biologically unattainable standard of beauty based on the "slender and tubular" ideal (Polivy & Herman, 2004, p. 1). Also, techniques such as digital image processing originate completely new and fake

pictures which are sold to the public as the “average” or the “better” body; this negatively affects women’s overall sense of self-worth (Reel, 2013, p. 21). The normalization and internalization of such an exacting beauty standard can lead to low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction (Dittmar & Howard, 2004, p. 478; Polivy & Herman, 2004, p. 2) since the individual feels pressed to comply with the canon in order to gain self-assurance, visibility, success and a sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, women engage with the beauty industry on a wide scale. Several authors have tried to elucidate why women submit to contemporary bodily disciplines despite some of the risks already discussed and, certainly, there is still not a consensus. There is a body of research that has cast doubt on external (socio-cultural) factors of influence. For them, women have to be taken into account as active agents who freely decide to indulge themselves with the pleasures offered by current beauty disciplines (Black, 2006; Davis, 2003). Under this premise, the adherence to certain beauty rituals is considered an expression of women’s agency. Women invest their time and money in certain beauty rituals as a means of taking control of their own lives; the achievement of—or the approximation to—an ‘appropriate’ feminine image confers power upon women within their specific socio-cultural milieu.

The makeover canon is reinforcing these ideas with a narrative of transformation that relentlessly sells the promise of a better life, be it in the form of a better job, a handsome partner or emotional stability. In a similar way, *Ugly Betty*’s plot structure also praises the wonders of external transformation as an empowering tool. This is clearly made explicit in the ending of the TV series. But there are other moments in which the need for external appearance improvement is suggested as a necessary part of becoming a desirable and triumphant individual (e.g. 1:02, 4:11).

Reversing the angle of approach as regards women’s involvement with embellishment culture, it must be noted that, for other researchers, the crux of the matter does not lie in the supposed freedom of choice mentioned before. Several authors suggest that women may feel pushed into specific oppressive bodily rituals so as to adjust themselves to the expectations of their social context; by consuming beauty goods and changing their external appearance, women try to get close to a demanding and rigorously stereotyped feminine self in order to gain a sense of security and power. Baker-Sperry (2007) has already noted that girls, even at the age of six, know that beauty is rewarded in society (p. 722). In this direction, Weber (2009d) explains the process by which makeover TV shows, in the name of conventional gender reinforcement, perform normative discourses that teach subjects how to regulate themselves:

...if I, as viewer at home, see someone ridiculed in a plexiglass box due to her wrinkles and sun spots, I fully understand that I must work to enact a makeover of myself so as to avert the censorious gaze I’ve seen demonstrated on television. By reminding the mass population that others may be watching, television creates a disciplinary technology through which the population is induced to govern itself. (p. 89)

Similarly, *Ugly Betty* seems to suggest that some strategies are required so as to evade sanctioning gazes and harsh value judgments. As time goes by, the heroine of this story succumbs to social pressure and starts to undergo a series of subtle physical transformations. By the fourth and last season, Betty displays a very different image from that of the girl with the poncho, and her different physical traits already resemble those of her magazine’s *successful* colleagues. The maximum exponent of this dysfunctional process is found in the last episodes,

when Betty already displays her most stylish, white-Western look and gains both professional achievement and personal happiness (4:17; 4:18; 4:19; 4:20). From the very moment Betty gets rid of her braces (4:17), a range of happy and triumphant events start flooding her life: she not only arouses romantic feelings in her former boyfriend, Henry (4:18), but also starts to awaken Daniel's interest, who ends up asking Betty for a date in the last episode (4:20). But, as if that was not enough, Betty is also offered her dream job in London. The message that could be easily inferred from this is that Betty's personal and professional fulfilment is transparently bound with the achievement of a stereotypically attractive body. In other words, she gets her happy ending *because* of the alteration of her outward image.

### **From Individual Empowerment to Collective Approval**

The makeover complex is built upon traditional liberal tropes of individual achievement, self-fulfilment and freedom of choice. Yet, with these narratives of transformation comes an implicit message: self-realization is achieved once access to restricted privileges is granted. The way of ensuring this access entails a consumer-led strategy that warrants the liberation through the purchasing of all kinds of commodities. Weber (2009c) has also made mention of this process with regard to the specific case of bodily routines. For her, the makeover genre "imports neoliberal ideologies, which position the subject as an entrepreneur of the self, who does and, indeed, must engage in care of the body and its symbolic referents in order to be competitive within a larger global marketplace" (p. 39).

These market dynamics suppose that people with a moderate to low spending power stay out of the equation. Therefore, a contradiction appears: liberation encompasses oppressive practices. Those who count on specific socio-economic assets enjoy the absolute freedom claimed by capitalism; those who do not see themselves downtrodden on their way to freedom by the assets which they do not possess. These tensions and paradoxes of the neoliberal economy can be directly connected with the politics of post-feminism, which is regarded as disseminating a politics of contradiction, according to several feminist—and non-feminist—scholars and researchers (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2012; Gorton, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; Moseley & Read, 2002; Roberts, 2007). In the last couple of decades, post-feminist discourse has become the hegemonic form of feminism within wide-ranging varieties of popular culture, from TV shows and cinema to journals and magazines. Contemporary makeover TV genre is enabled, as Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2012) argue, in part because of the normalization of post-feminist politics and their reliance on contemporary commodity culture as the primary channel for individual improvement.

Contemporary post-feminist culture stands true to the logics of the neoliberal economy; hence, it also resorts to emancipatory discourses of individual freedom and personal choice. However, one of the problematic aspects of this relatively recently gained power is that it is subordinated to women's self-confidence and outward appearance, "which in turn depend on the services of fashion and beauty industries—all of which, needless to say, must be purchased" (Roberts, 2007, p. 229). This is made evident, for instance, in *Swag*, the fourth episode of *Ugly Betty*. Here, it is suggested that through the purchasing of specific goods you can feel more attractive and therefore, a more self-assured and powerful self. In this occasion, Betty shows herself afflicted by doubt after giving a pharmacist her Gucci bag in exchange for her ill dad's prescriptions. She unburdens herself to Hilda (her older sister):

**Betty:** Christina says that fashion is good for the soul... and when I was walking around with my Gucci today, it was like I was 3 years old again and holding Mom's purse...and I actually felt pretty.

**Hilda:** I know, mama.  
(1:04 "31.10-31.35")

Betty imagined herself living the post-feminist dream wherein a woman can "walk into a room, have all eyes on [her], and for the first time in [her] life, command attention with dignity, poise, and beauty" (Weber, 2009). The irony is that the post-feminist's relentless focus on individual empowerment is strongly tied up with commanding attention of the public. The notion of women's power and freedom of choice loses consistency when such an ambiguity is made evident. The individualism characteristic of post-feminist discourses disguises indeed women's wish for the achievement of a sense of belonging and group acceptance. At the same time, it should not be dismissed that this philosophy also entails the fact that failure to comply with a prefabricated female identity and outward appearance may arouse sentiments of shame. As several authors point out, those who remain resistant and ignore the makeover's normative judgments of outward—and inward—beauty can feel rejected and may even experience exclusion (Ahmed, 2004; Doyle & Karl, 2008; Palmer, 2006; Roberts, 2007; Weber, 2009a).

Betty has a difficult time at Mode because of these "(ill) logics" (Weber, 2009b, p. 7) of operation. It is mainly at the beginning of the TV dramedy, when Betty still displays her most 'slovenly' look, that she experiences the most humiliating situations. Betty has a round-shaped figure and wears braces and out-of-date glasses; she also has wild, unsightly hair and seems to lack awareness of current fashion trends. It is because of her different use of fashion and her physical traits that she is shown, on many occasions, stoically enduring the mockery of her workmates (1:01; 1:02; 1:21; 2:17; 4:04). One of the cruellest and most degrading situations can be found in the pilot episode. On that occasion, a Brazilian model does not turn up for a photographic session at the last minute. Betty happens to appear in the studio and the photographer decides that she is perfect for the session as her skin tone is similar to the Brazilian model. Her boss, Daniel, simply asks "Fun?" and the photographer answers "I bet you she quits before she does it". During the rest of the sequence we see a displeased Betty trying to keep her composure and dignity in an embarrassing situation. She is squeezed into a tiny leather dress between two skinny models who are double her height. As a coda to these circumstances, staff's guffaws start to be heard all around the studio (1:01 "25.27-27.40").

This kind of process in which the different is ridiculed also demonstrates a tendency towards the erasure or neutralization of original unmediated physical traits. Natural or inborn identity signifiers of difference must be homogenized in order to comply with the requirements of the dominant socio-cultural body. The reward for constructing a standardized selfhood is universal approval. If not, the individual is suggested to have failed. In addition, those people who are blessed with generous levels of incomes are the ones who have the possibility of purchasing the goods offered by the fashion and beauty industries. Within this scenario, post-feminist politics and contemporary makeover narratives find a convergent point: both evidence narrow class and race boundaries. Drawing on what Herman Grey (1995) calls an "assimilationist discourse of invisibility" (p. 85), Weber (2009c) has also noted that makeover discourses hardly allow for difference, building a world of sameness and universalized normalcy that "codes as conventionally gendered, white, middle class, heterosexually desirable, confident, and well-adjusted" (pp. 70-71). People who do not conform or adhere to a normative frame have

no intelligibility as valid subjects (2009b, p. 13) and, in fact, they could be considered what Judith Butler (2004) has referred to as “unreal people” (p. 26).

Several authors have relied on the work of Bourdieu (2010) to interpret how a consumer-led economy functions in the context of a highly pyramidally-structured society. People who possess the dominant gender, race and capital signifiers exert their power over those positioned in a less privileged place in such a fragmented social order (McRobbie, 2009b; Palmer, 2004; Roberts, 2007; Weber, 2009d). True to Bourdieu’s understanding of taste as an expression of class stratification, Angela McRobbie (2009b) has argued that makeover narratives function in close relationship with social mobility and consumerism. She argues that makeover programs “produce newly defined social hierarchies” (p. 129). This kind of TV show reproduces an aspirational social order based on upper-middle class standards of behaviour and appearance. They normally resort to the advice of experts of refined taste (usually white, upper-middle class people) who aim to help lower-class women (and sometimes, a handful of men) with little–or no–sense of style. These experts make use of the most irreverent and harsh verbal reprimands for the sake of participants, who must learn to conform to the most stereotypical appearance and manners (pp. 128-134).

This pattern is easily recognizable in *Ugly Betty*. Marc and Amanda are the greatest expression of these tacit socio-cultural practices. Though Betty’s professional rank is the same as Marc’s and even superior to Amanda’s, the two believe that their precise fashion rituals confer a superior position and authority over her. As a consequence, they repeatedly molest, harass and humiliate Betty. This new style of television show employs a lack of respect in their formula and disguises it with a touch of stylish humour which plays the chagrin down. McRobbie (2009b) notes that:

[i]n the past the rules of television, and specially public service broadcasting, were such that public humiliation of people for their failure to adhere to appropriate respectable and middle-class standards in speech or appearance would have been considered offensive, discriminatory or prejudicial... This new style of denigration is done with a degree of self-conscious irony... in post ‘politically-correct’ times, this is just good fun. It is now possible, thank goodness, to laugh at less fortunate people once again. (pp. 129-130)

Indeed, it can be argued that *Ugly Betty*’s plotline revolves around a class and race-based narrative wherein a young woman struggles to find her place in a social milieu which is far from her cultural origins. Although Betty is more than qualified for her job, incredibly talented, devoted, hardworking and a very kind soul, she has a difficult time trying to fit in to Mode. She seems to be the perfect candidate for the magazine, but all these virtues are not enough for Betty to succeed in the fashion publishing business. She will have to adapt–or even erase–her essence in order to prosper within the professional environment in which she has chosen to earn her living. This is shown mainly at the beginning of the TV dramedy when she displays a deep sense of unease, not just because she has to cope with the frivolity, banality and the superfluity of her work-mates, but because she feels she will be not able to change herself–externally and internally–sufficiently so as to fit in the magazine (1:01; 1:02). This process has been well documented and, as Weber pertinently notes (2009d), it “marks the makeover as a site of what Bourdieu has termed ‘symbolic violence’, where holders of superior symbolic capital use the power conferred by that capital against those with markedly less social currency” (p. 97).



Roberts has sensibly addressed the work of Gareth Palmer (which also draws on Bourdieu's theory) to lay stress on the fact that makeover TV shows "are primarily about naturalizing middle-class tastes and inculcating them in their petit-bourgeois subjects and audiences (Roberts, 2007, p. 235), teaching them, in turn, how to become "citizens in the republic of taste" (Palmer, 2004, p. 185). A careful scrutiny of *Ugly Betty* demonstrates that the TV series assimilates and engages with this kind of controversial principles. For instance, this is demonstrated in an episode in which Wilhelmina (Creative Director at Mode) is shown on a fashion TV channel wearing a sweatshirt and a pair of clogs. She is overtly criticized and ridiculed by Suzuki St. Pierre, a fashion TV reporter; this episode of *Ugly Betty* opens with Suzuki's words:

**Suzuki:** It appears that Wilhelmina Slater has been struck blind by the fashion gods (thunder crashes). Since the Mode diva's former lover Connor Owens bolted with the Meade millions, rumors have been swirling that 'la slater' is off her game. Well, first came the sudden announcement that, gasp, and now with reports that Willie's hunk of great barrier beef has met an untimely demise, it appears the former fashion icon has gone salvation barmy. Oh! YIKES!  
(4:07 "00.54-01:24")

Suzuki uses a sardonic and accusatory tone in order to denigrate Wilhelmina's casual and plain attire. In that same episode, a few minutes later, Marc also reproaches Wilhelmina for her outfit's election: "Willie, our futures are tied together. You're never gonna get another job wearing synthetic gardening footwear!" (4:07 "02.26-02.57"). The way in which the dialogue flows suggests that specific apparel which appertains mainly to the working class should be avoided, as it not only provokes feelings of condemnation and shame but could also compromise the chance of social success and cultural visibility.

Another prime example of such dynamics is Betty's metamorphosis and the felicity it confers upon her. Once she adheres to the standards of taste and style stipulated by the higher classes of the social ladder, she gets her economic reward in the form of a promotion and a promising offer of employment for a magazine based in London. Yet again, the ending of this *dramedy* holds an implicit message which suggests that the adaptation of the self to the dominant discourses of class, race and consumerism provides the subject with all kind of bonuses and benefits.

The kind of narrative found in *Ugly Betty* evidences, in turn, the contradictory processes at play within the post-feminist and neo-liberalist discourses of freedom of choice and action. Post-feminist ideology relentlessly claims that women already possess active agency; yet such agency is primary legitimated within the constraints of the capitalist consumerist order. Post-feminism has brought to the scene a new account of feminism that strongly associates agency with individualism and consumerism, a kind of feminism in which "girls gain access to power through their bodies and their credit cards" (Sheridan-Rabideau, 2009, p. 7).

*Ugly Betty*'s plot offers another example of these modes of operation; one of the decisions made by Betty in order to adapt herself in order to get closer to "bourgeois gender identities and the consumer culture that goes with them..." (Roberts, 2007, p. 244) is her move from Queens to Manhattan (3:01). She is advised against renting a flat in the City as it is very expensive and she can hardly afford it with only the help of her salary. But she is even willing to "eat ramen twice a week or-or do some more overtime" (3:01 "14.59-15.03") providing that she

can live in New York City. In the same direction, although Betty does not explicitly express an interest in going shopping or to beauty salons, she starts to fix her hair and to dress more in accordance with her colleagues at Mode, up to the point that in the opening sequence of the episode *Smokin' Hot* she is shown wearing the same outfit as Amanda (4:14). But even Amanda, who is well-aware of fashion trends, experiences the pressures of this constant surveillance of outer appearance. In the episode *Fey's Sleigh Ride* Amanda is reprimanded by Marc for wearing two-year-old Manolo Blahniks (1:05 "07:50-08.10"). In another episode Amanda teaches Betty how to get the latest cosmetics and the more expensive brand clothing without having to spend a single cent. She has mastered a range of tricks and deceitful strategies so as to be on the crest of the fashion wave despite her low income (3:10). These examples clearly acknowledge the fact that maintaining specific beauty standards is hard work in itself.

In the same breath, this whole assimilationist process also entails that individuals have to break with their own identities and build new—more conventional—selves. Betty is said to be Mexicana in the series and she displays the stereotypical traits of the Mexican woman: short, dark-skinned, dark-haired and chubby with thick eyebrows. Her physical traits or her different sense of fashion are never exoticized or portrayed as distinctively alluring and enchanting. On the contrary, her Hispanic origins—and what characterizes them—are frequently reviled and ridiculed. Betty's features automatically exclude her from the category of 'beautiful', at least within the conventional beauty discourses that operate at Mode. In the very first sequence of the pilot episode, Betty literally chases her interviewer while reciting her curriculum vitae because he had decided to ignore her immediately after seeing her (1:01 "00.30-01.45"). In this very same episode, Amanda, Marc, Daniel and Wilhelmina exhibit their most cruel looks of disgust when they first meet Betty. This is a pattern which is repeated later in various episodes, be it in the form of the mockery of her outfit choices (for example, Marc's diary, *Betty's Screensavers of Shame*), or scorn because of her different physical traits (1:06; 1:21; 2:05). In another episode, *Million Dollar Smile*, Marc tries to hide Betty's Hispanic signifiers. In this occasion Betty's ID picture has turned out badly and Marc offers his help so as to try to enhance Betty's photograph. He finally photoshops her image into a blond-haired and blue-eyed woman (4:17 "08.40-09.10").

But the most significant episode as regards the scorn towards Betty's cultural roots is *The Lyin' the Watch and the Wardrobe* (1:06). In this episode, Marc dresses up as Betty for Halloween. The disguise of Marc's election is the "Guadalajara" poncho that Betty wore her first day at Mode. A poncho is a typical South American garment, but Amanda, Marc and Wilhelmina contemplate it with horror and chuckle about a piece of clothing that says "Guadalajara" instead of "Dolce & Gabbana" or "Prada" (1:01; 1:05).

In this regard, Vanessa Williams (Wilhelmina) must be also mentioned. Despite being of African American descent (Anonymous, 2011), her look is almost indistinguishable from other white-Western women. Indeed, she displays in the TV series a look that is completely adapted to the occidental norm. Wilhelmina always sports sleek hair and her clothes and complements tend to be more sober than ethnically rich or exotic. In addition, she hardly displays an awareness of her own ethnic roots; in fact, there are only two sequences in which she explicitly refers to herself as "black" (2.02 "23:18") and as a woman of colour (3.02 "05:30").

In the end, both Wilhelmina and Betty succumb to generalized female beauty discourses and undergo a self-effacement process in which they lose their originality to become just another conventional beauty. Wilhelmina, as well as Betty, takes on the traits of the conventional white-Western beauty discourse and imitates its precepts. Wilhelmina does it with the help of Botox, diets, and expensive clothes and cosmetics. Betty undergoes her makeover all along the series

with subtle changes in her face, hair, body and clothes. In both cases, Wilhelmina and Betty are deracialized in order to conform to the northern European template.

### **Erasing the Subject for the Sake of the True Self**

It has been widely argued thus far that the makeover complex implies the attenuation or even the erasure of individual signifiers of gender, race and social status, especially when those are not in consonance with the dominant ones. It connects this analysis with another vantage point: makeover TV shows suggest to their audience that in order “to communicate an ‘authentic self’, one must overwrite and replace the ‘false’ signifiers enunciated by the natural body” (Weber, 2009b, p. 4). This implies that natural or unaltered bodies are flawed or still in the process of discovering the gifts and talents which are latent but not yet manifested. Makeover stories talk about an evolutionary process which, almost always, entails that the person works in order to find what is already there; it is not about eliminating the old self, but unfolding the better essence of oneself. While analysing various makeover TV shows Weber (2009b) also makes mention of this phenomenon:

Before-bodies quite 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?’ The answer from both the television makeover and a larger makeover culture, as the cover to a *Ladies Home Journal* proclaims, is that you can be ‘You-Only Better!’ (p. 7)

Notwithstanding, such an acclaimed self-discovering unveils another incongruence of makeover principles: the ‘true’ self is a manifestation of an alteration process. Or, in other words, without intervention it is not possible that the authentic woman flowers. “In this mediated world where gender, sex, and sexuality melt into a single signifier of the gorgeous female subject, the woman finds her most ‘natural’ iteration only when she is made over” (Weber, 2009a, p. 170).

Although there are no explicit references in the plot to Betty’s ‘true’ self, the way the story is articulated reveals that, in fact, a brand new world full of possibilities is opened when she gets to change her appearance significantly. With the new image, a ‘better’ Betty becomes evident. ‘Before Betty’ is extremely talented and gets to solve the most critical situations for the survival of the Mead Empire and its flagship publication, *Mode* (1:01; 1:02; 1:04; 2:09; 4:07). She is also a very good work mate and, in spite of being harassed by her colleagues, she is always willing to help whenever they need it. But all her virtues are not enough for her to prosper in the editorial world. She has to reveal her true nature, her true self: her accommodated white-Occidental image. Only then Betty’s virtues will be recognized.

Betty’s new sophisticated and occidental look, exhibiting a shapely figure, chic accessories and elegant costumes, gives an undoubted boost to her career. The title of the fourth season is representative of this metamorphosis’ formula: “From Poncho to Honcho”. This slogan clearly expresses the range of changes that will take place in Betty’s outward appearance. Yet, those changes are not only related to her look but also to her achievements as a professional. Almost immediately after the restyling of her bodily image, a promising career beckons. The Betty with braces and the poncho was a candid soul still looking for a more confident, determined and fulfilled Betty; the one with the honcho and a million dollar smile is already a self-assured and successful business-woman. The dynamics of the story clearly suggest that a

'better' Betty was still to spring forth. With her makeover, she becomes who she really should have been from the very beginning. The juxtaposition of the un-designed and frustrated self on the one hand, and the remodelled and fully rewarded self on the other, unleashes a narrative process which conveys an incoherent message: it is possible to be a sound and stable individual if the subject attains the (unattainable) perfect body or, as Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2012) have succinctly put it: "in order to lead a rewarding, fulfilling psychological and personal life, the cost is nothing less than a perfect, medically enhanced body..." (p. 495).

Having reached this point, it is especially important to bear a critical stance in mind so as not to dismiss the fact that changing ourselves is a big business. The idealization of the slender woman is promoted by the beauty industry, an industry that is controlled by men and handles thousands of millions (Hidalgo, 2011, Marcos, 2009), estimated at around \$25 billion in 1982 and \$330 billion by 2008 (Jones, 2010). Following this line of argument, it is worthwhile recalling the work of the American author Naomi Wolf (1991). In her book, *The Beauty Myth*, she states that "'Beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard" (p. 12). Wolf further wonders:

[w]hy is it never said that the really crucial function that women serve as aspiring beauties is to buy more things for the body? Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that they will buy more things if they are kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring 'beauties'. (p. 66)

The more diets and cosmetic treatments we engage in, the more money is received by "the diet book publishers, pharmaceutical companies, herbal supplement manufacturers, 'shaping' salons, gyms, doctors, and all the rest" (Maine & Kelly, 2005, p. 28).

More recently, in *Living Dolls*, Natasha Walter (2010) has claimed that our culture is constantly suggesting that women will succeed and achieve their aspirations through physical remaking and enhancement (pp. 66-67). Women's self-worth is directly proportional to their appearance, since "[w]e look for life's meaning and the answer to life's challenges in the shape or our bodies" (Maine & Kelly, 2005, p. 13). With respect to this, we should note the case of specific female characters of the dramedy who externalize some kind of anxiety due to their physical appearance: for instance, Amanda's concern with her age and how her life will end up when she is no longer 'eye candy'. In *Secretaries Day* she is shown extremely worried about getting older in a world in which she is mainly valued for her outer appearance (Becki Newton was 28 years old by then) (1:21 "18.39-19.27"). In another episode, Amanda states that her work and entire life rely upon her bodily appearance (4:02 "24.55-25.40"). As it has been noted earlier, such a prescriptive frame of reference fosters women's uneasiness when they try to comply with the disciplinary practices contained in such incongruent discourses. *Ugly Betty* also shows these modes of operation by portraying Amanda as appearing to suffer from an eating disorder. She is shown devouring large amounts of sweets and chocolates every time that a new challenge or menace appear in her life (1:05; 1:10; 1:21; 2:01). As is relentlessly suggested by current consumer culture and one of its bulwarks, the beauty industry, Amanda faces obstacles and tries to settle things in her life by controlling—or not—her body. Women are led to believe that disciplining and changing their bodies will also bring change and discipline to those specific facets of their lives which are in need of it.

There are other characters that show, at specific moments, a kind of unease and anxiety because of the inflexible image and style trends they have to comply with. Wilhelmina Slater and her obsession with youth, slimness and beauty is one example of this (1:01; 1:06; 1:14; 1:23; 3:02). Apart from her regular Botox injections, Wilhelmina submits herself to whatever treatment and new technique that promises to help her to remain young and pretty. In one occasion, Wilhelmina is shown trying a cocktail dress on; as it seems too small for her, Christina suggests that she tries a bigger size:

**Marc:** [shouting] Maybe you ordered the wrong size!

**Christina:** I ordered a two; she has always been a two, but clearly, someone's been enjoying too many complimentary cheese straws.

**Wilhelmina:** I understood that. What are you saying, Carlotta?

**Marc:** Christina.

**Christina:** There might be a slight possibility that she might have just, maybe... gained...

**Wilhelmina:** Gained what?

**Christina:** What? Nothing. Just maybe...like a little, wee bit of...weight?

**Wilhelmina:** [screaming]  
(1:06 “17:38-18:12”)

The rest of the episode shows an extremely obsessed and stressed Wilhelmina who tries to lose the pounds she has gained with steam therapy and strict dieting. Marc and Amanda also share Wilhelmina's excessive concern with looking perfect throughout the whole TV series. All in all, the makeover complex and its consumerist strategies convey this kind of dynamic, a dynamic that Weber (2009c) has also pertinently identified. She states that:

[w]omen are not encouraged to go without makeup, wear clothes that ‘make them look like boys’, or in any way detract from conventional forms of femininity. Women who wear clothes that are ‘too ethnic’, artistic, or individualized are refashioned to emit signs of middle-class professionalism and desirability. (p. 61)

On the other hand, and in order to bring this article to an end, it must be highlighted that makeover stories, like the happily-ever-after of the fairy tale, always offer a concluding happy ending. Readers and viewers are left with a ‘now and forever’ which does not offer the possibility of further knowing—or at least guessing—whether the marvels of the transformation are kept over the course of time or not. And indeed, this happens with the ending of *Ugly Betty*. The last scene shows an exultant Betty going to work in her new position in London. She meets Daniel who asks her for a date. Then, the last scene ends in a fade out to the closing theme (4:20). The viewer's last information about Betty is the good mood of the ending of her story. The idea which is more likely to be conveyed through the workings of such closed endings is that, from that moment on, the happiness of the final sequence will expand and remain for the rest of the protagonists' lives. Hence, there is no place within the discourse of transformative practices for the evaluation of negative aspects that could occur in the future; on the contrary, they are completely omitted and/or erased. Weber (2009b) has wisely noted that:

[w]e may wonder what occurs after ‘the end’, but the only thing we can know for sure is what takes place during the narrative. Across the makeover canon we see repeated stories of humiliation, desire, rescue, tribulation, fortitude, and triumph, all played out before the camera’s eye, and all leading to the ultimate prize of celebrated selfhood with little continuation of the narrative that might undo or problematize after-outcomes. (p. 22)

## Conclusion

True to the makeover narrative, *Ugly Betty*’s storyline prepares a particular transformation for the protagonist. The stories of modification very often convey idealized (and alienating) forms of femininity that openly exclude specific bodily features and certain class and race signifiers. Only when the heroine displays a look more adapted to the conventional dictates of white-Western femininity does she get the social visibility which is needed to succeed. Wilhelmina’s character also succumbs to the limiting beauty discourses of the dominant socio-cultural body. In the manner of Betty, her racial originality is neutralized and homogenized to become just another white-Western beauty.

Makeover narratives reproduce an aspirational social order based on upper-middle class standards. People who possess the dominant gender, race and capital signifiers exert their influence and power over those positioned in a less privileged place in contemporary fragmented and highly pyramidal social orders (McRobbie, 2009a; Palmer, 2004; Roberts, 2007; Weber, 2009d). Betty finally absorbs the look, the fashion sense and sometimes the manners of those people who are shown—in the series—to be better positioned than she is on the social ladder. Yet again, the ending of this ‘dramedy’ holds an implicit message: the adjustment of individuals to predominant discourses of class and race provide them with all kind of bonuses and benefits.

Within such a socio-economic framework, consumerist practices set themselves up as one of the most helpful means in order to get almost immediate access to all those advantages that an adequate reshaping can supply. But the constricting nature of the neo-liberal economy comes into play: those people who do not fall within the sufficient level of income are excluded from the equation. This monetary obstacle, then, constitutes one of the many contradictions in the contemporary economic system; the traditional liberal tropes of individual achievement and freedom of choice make visible an incongruity, since such power to act and make virtually autonomous selections is in fact made available only to people with high earnings. The makeover complex merges with such exclusionist “(ill) logics” (Weber, 2009b, p. 7) of operation.

The tensions and paradoxes of neo-liberalism are not only assimilated by the contemporary makeover discourse but also by what has come to be known as “post-feminism”, or the intersection between popular culture and feminism (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 60). It not only adopts liberal credos of individualism and conspicuous consumption but also the commented contradictory dynamics of such an economic model. Furthermore, post-feminism is, as several authors argue, *inherently contradictory* (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2012; Gorton, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; Roberts, 2007; Tasker & Negra, 2007).

One of post-feminist’s most flagrant inconsistencies is its relentless focus on women’s empowerment, yet such hard-won rights are subjected to the burdening exigencies of an androcentric and commodified system. Women’s outward appearance becomes the main site of their empowerment; a woman, then, is encouraged (and even supposed) to comply with a

prefabricated female identity that can be, naturally, *purchased*. Then, it could also be argued that women's active agency is narrowly framed by, yet again, the spending power and white-Western hegemonic standards of beauty normalized by current patriarchal culture. Furthermore, failure to comply with such restraining models of femininity will be communicated as an undesirable attitude or as Weber (2009d) convincingly states, a "letting-yourself-go disorder (occasioned by heightened dowdiness and insufficient self-care)" (p. 110). The imposition of beauty culture, as Imelda Whelehan (2000) notes, "leaves many victims in its wake-those who don't conform to its preferred images and those who are too poor to exercise 'control' over their lives through the 'liberation' of consumerism" (p. 178). It is difficult to concede credibility to post-feminist conceptions of female power when their own formulation includes such subordinating rituals and principles.

That being said, it can be stated that there is a clear interplay among current economic tendencies, makeover narratives and post-feminist tenets. Such an interaction and its paradoxical processes are also evidenced in the popular culture product that has been chosen for this research, *Ugly Betty*. It has been already argued that Betty and Wilhelmina soften their racial signifiers so as to accommodate the Western ideal of female beauty; furthermore, such a transformation also confers a higher social status on both characters. The only difference between Betty and Wilhelmina is that Betty is shown to be in the process, while Wilhelmina is the finished product who has (supposedly) attained a successful and respectable status. In the case of Betty, her ability to gradually lose weight and restyle herself "operates as a clear symbol of successful upward aspiration, of the penetrability of class boundaries to those who have 'the right stuff'" (Bordo, 2003, p. 195).

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