

“Ugly” America Dreams the American Dream

In 1997, then MTV Networks chairman Tom Freston was quoted as saying that the future of mainstream television programming was “the tale of two continents—the bringing together of North and South America.”¹ Spurred by the demographic explosion of the U.S. Latina/o television market throughout the past twenty years, U.S. media conglomerates are trying to unlock U.S. Latina/o ratings by looking south to the most popular form of programming in Mexico and Latin America—the telenovela.² It is no surprise then that one of the biggest new network shows in 2006 featured U.S.-born Honduran actor America Ferrera in an ABC prime-time dramedy (a combination of drama and comedy) based on the international telenovela megahit *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea*.³ Global media integration, the desire for synergistic programming, and the success of cross-promotional strategies such as dual-language programming are encouraging the development of shows and entertainment personalities that can easily move across multiple audience demographics.⁴ Latinas and Latina/o programming are at the forefront of global media integration. Television scholar John Tomlinson argues that globally syndicated television shows demonstrate the characteristics of contemporary programming that crosses linguistic and national borders, thereby participating in a complex web of media production and reception.⁵ *Ugly Betty* is no exception.

The original 1999 Colombian telenovela was readapted by Mexico’s Televisa in 2000 and 2006, and both of those productions were later distributed by multinational conglomerate Univision to its stations in the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere. Finally, the 1999 telenovela was developed and adapted for mainstream English-language programming by U.S. Cuban Silvio Horta, network executive Ben Silverman, and Salma Hayek. *Ugly Betty* demonstrates the transnational flows and interconnections of global media and audiences. The international popularity and portability of programs such as *Ugly Betty* depend on the production of universally appealing story

lines that captivate multiple audiences regardless of age, gender, race, nationality, and language.⁶ In interviews publicizing the show, the producers often highlighted its broad liberal ideology and universal themes by describing it as “an ugly-duckling story of a girl who’s working in this world of beauty and fashion where getting people to see past her appearance isn’t an easy thing.”⁷ In other words, the show is about more than a Latina or a Mexican woman from Queens trying to fit into white corporate culture. It is about the trope of the “American dream,” a familiar story grounded in the ideological belief that free choice, individualism, equality, and hard work under limited government intervention will allow all to succeed according to their abilities. Consequently, part of *Ugly Betty*’s global triumph is the program’s careful production and, I would argue, the ideological sublimation of Latina identity and Latinidad.

The ideology of liberalism, as one of the foundational and continually dominant ideologies of the United States, presupposes a society defined by fair competition and individual rights. Liberalism is the ideology at the center of conservative arguments against affirmative action and equal opportunity programs. By proposing that, all things being equal, everyone has the same opportunity to compete in the U.S. marketplace, success is determined by how hard someone works and not by their economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or race. Ethnic and racial identities are to be assimilated, lost, and erased through the celebrated “melting pot” of U.S. culture. Liberalism thus devalues the importance of communitarian experiences and social identities as determinants or barriers to individual success. Instead, it proposes that all individuals are fundamentally equal and that, regardless of their social identity, everyone can control his or her fate through hard work, learned skills, and acquired education—the foundational myth of a U.S. meritocracy. At its core, the American dream relies on the assumption that the United States is a nation founded on the ideals of liberalism in which individuals compete and succeed based on their unique merits. People are ultimately rewarded for the “merits” they earn and not those they are born into. Part of the backlash against Jennifer Lopez, as detailed in chapter 2, is the public perception that she has not earned her privilege—that she is benefiting economically simply because of her ethnorracial identity and body and not because of her talent and skill. The ideological framework of the American dream mandates that, to be successful as a mainstream television show, *Ugly Betty*’s character development and story lines must revolve around earning “it” the hard way.

In this chapter I explore the symbolic colonization of Latina bodies in *Ugly Betty* through the show’s production of Latina ethnic ambiguity and

panethnic universalism, both of which make the program more marketable. Through the lens of the American dream, Latinidad becomes coded as a “positive” depoliticized identity because it exists outside preexisting U.S. racial binaries and therefore cannot be coded as white or black. Before I continue discussing the way Latina ethnic ambiguity and panethnicity function to produce Latinidad, I must briefly return to my previous arguments regarding ethnic authenticity. The *Frida* chapter documents how media outlets that are dependent on performances of Latina ethnicity often rely on constructions of authenticity that ultimately reinforce racial and ethnic differences based on established social hierarchies and globally familiar stereotypical characteristics, such as accented English, dark hair, and dark eyes. Because of the dearth of complex images about ethnic and racial minorities in films and on television, the few mainstream media performances of ethnic identity that do exist are often held to high standards of authenticity and imbued with social significance by audiences in their respective communities. *Ugly Betty* negotiates the competing cultural demands for authenticity with the demands of globalization by situating its Latina characters and their story lines not within the production of ethnic authenticity but through depictions informed by deracialized liberalism and grounded in a campy performance of panethnic Latina identity.

In particular, the program’s Betty-as-Horatio Alger premise relies on the careful sublimation of an authentic ethnic Latina or Mexican identity into a globally consumable, symbolically colonizing assimilated panethnicity (emphasis on the pan and de-emphasis on the performance of ethnicity). I purposefully use the word *sublimation* throughout this chapter to indicate that Latina ethnicity is not erased but rather turned into a more ethereal form, a form that is not easily located within U.S. racial formations and therefore easier to disseminate to audiences on a global level. The sublimation of a specific Mexican ethnic authenticity in *Ugly Betty* also moves the program away from the contemporary cultural politics surrounding immigration and Mexican identity. Ethnicity and race are not the *raison d’être* of the lead characters or the motivation behind the main story lines. Rather, it is the logic of the American dream, which assumes the hard-working Betty and her more wayward sister, Hilda, will eventually achieve personal, professional, and economic success regardless of their class or ethnic background. It is a story line that has become increasingly apparent in the 2008–2009 season as Betty gets a promotion and moves out of her family’s house, Hilda operates her own home business, and Ignacio enters the low-wage workforce as a U.S. citizen.

Globally Programming Latinidad

During the last ten years, the lucrative potential of the U.S. Latina/o and Latin American markets—along with the long-term success of Spanish-language conglomerate Univisión—has increasingly drawn the attention of U.S. mainstream media producers. Because Univisión was not rated in the Nielsen Television Index until 2005, it often did not have the data to compete on a par with the other four major U.S. networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC). Univisión has since established itself as the fifth major network in the United States, and its Los Angeles station, KMEX, was the nation's No. 1 station among adults 18–49 in 2008. In addition, KMEX's local 6 p.m. newscast has been No. 1 nationally since 1995.¹⁰ The current ratings landscape proves John Sinclair's observation that “to the extent that Spanish speakers in the United States can be thought of as a single audience for television in that language, the United States forms the fifth largest, and the wealthiest, domestic television market in the Spanish-speaking world.”¹¹ Among major entertainment media conglomerates, the economic and global dominance of Univisión has upped the ante for capturing U.S. Latina/o and Latin American television markets and turned attention to Univisión's No. 1 form of global programming, the telenovela.

Telenovelas are hourlong daily melodramatic serials, much like U.S. soap operas, but with one set of lead actors and one primary story line that begins and concludes within a period of about six months. Some telenovelas are romances, others are dramas or historical re-creations. As one of the most powerful multinational media conglomerates in the world, Mexico's Televisa Corporation is a central player in Spanish-language television. Mexico's largest television network, Televisa also is the world's largest producer of telenovelas, and it exports them to the United States, Latin America, Europe and Asia.¹² Among Latin American and U.S. Latina/o audiences, telenovelas handily top the ratings.¹³ During its peak viewership in 2000, the original Colombian production of *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea* drew as much as a 72 percent market share in its home country.¹⁴ Its popularity spread across Latin America, reaching 59 percent of audiences in Ecuador, 57 percent in Panama, and 42 percent in Venezuela in March 2001.¹⁵ On Univisión in 2006, Televisa's most recent *Betty* reincarnation, *La Fea Más Bella*, delivered more 18–49 Latina/o adults in its time slot than all the five English-language networks combined. According to Nielsen's National Hispanic Television Index (NHTI), *Bella* was drawing 3.3 million viewers among bilingual households

I begin this chapter by mapping out the show's location within the contemporary landscape of global programming. Next, I combine textual analysis with a discussion of journalistic coverage and audience responses to the show during its premier season (2006–2007). The program's depictions of the lead character as a heterosexual second-generation Mexican woman living in New York City draw upon socially acceptable definitions of assimilated ethnic women. Not surprisingly, media critics, trade journalists, and audiences often affirm the program's liberal logic and panethnic universalism. The promotional campaign and journalistic coverage of the show further illustrate the role of liberalism in the symbolic colonization of Latinidad in a mainstream television show produced by several Latina/o professionals (Salma Hayek, Silvio Horta, Jose Tamez). Finally, I explore the influence of Horta, an openly gay U.S. Cuban producer and writer, on negotiating the characters' ethnic identity and introducing a queer sensibility that potentially symbolically ruptures the show's construction of Latinidad. In particular, I focus on audience readings of ethnic and sexual difference in a show whose story lines depend on sublimating those differences. O. Hugo Benavides argues that the program's global appeal depends on the ambiguous performance of ethnic, racial, and sexual difference, noting “*Ugly Betty* thus speaks to a large hybrid audience beyond Latinos, who see themselves enmeshed in a postmodern world where difference is being articulated in new ways.”¹⁶ Consequently, I analyze public discussions about the program's performance of identity through audience negotiations on blogs and Internet discussion boards.

Readings of ethnic difference within the show have one provocative exception. The program's use of queer camp and queer sexuality—especially in the mainstream context of Latina/o representations that are usually grounded in heterosexuality—provides an interesting example of symbolic rupture. Similar to audience reception of *Frida*, positive Latina/o media visibility, particularly of queer Latinidad, in an environment of invisibility and hostility once again appears to be a transformative moment with the potential to rupture dominant constructions of Latina/o identity, specifically representations of Latina femininity, Latina heteronormativity, and the Latina/o family. Examining the program's story lines and journalistic writings about the show creates a unique opportunity for studying how the media use Latinas and Latinidad to capture global audiences. Analyzing online responses to the program explores audience negotiations of Latina panethnicity, Latinidad, and multicultural flavors to sell products and programming.¹⁷

in 2006 compared with 855,000 for ABC's *Ugly Betty*.¹⁶ In June 2007, *Bella's* series finale drew an average audience of 7.4 million viewers to Univisión, while *Ugly Betty's* season finale a month earlier drew more than 10.5 million for all viewers.¹⁷

Because of the consistent ratings success and built-in audience for Spanish-language telenovelas, the major networks have been shopping for crossover programming based on the popular genre. A U.S.-based version of *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea* had been pitched to the major networks for several years before ABC, in collaboration with Hayek's Ventanarosa Productions, finally picked it up in 2006.¹⁸ The need to target larger, more diverse audiences during an era of global media integration has further encouraged three of the four major U.S. networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) to develop telenovela-based programming.¹⁹ Beginning in the 1980s, U.S. media companies followed in the steps of other corporations by actively pursuing media markets outside the United States.²⁰

The movement of U.S. television production companies toward telenovela-like programming and the initial success of *Ugly Betty* signal the popularity of the genre not only in Latin America and the United States but throughout the globe. The original Colombian production of *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea* has been locally adapted in India (2003), Israel (2003), Germany (2005), Russia (2005), Netherlands (2006), Spain (2006), and Greece (2007).²¹ ABC's current incarnation of *Ugly Betty* has aired in England, Australia, Spain, and Germany, among other locations. The online availability of the program on ABC's Web site further adds to its global reach. Such potential for broad national and global distribution is also driving the networks to develop crossover Latina/o-themed programming with multicultural casts inclusive of Latina/o characters. Historically leading the way, most industry experts argue, is ABC, which holds six of the Top Ten programs among U.S. Latinas/os 18–49 with shows such as *George Lopez*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Lost*, and *Ugly Betty*, which came in second only to CBS's *Survivor* in its 2006–2007 Thursday night time slot.²²

However, scholarly audience research actually indicates that wooing Latina/o audiences is more complicated than was once believed.²³ First-generation Spanish-dominant Latina/o audiences are loyal viewers of Spanish-language media for news and entertainment, while second-generation Latina/o audiences often move between Spanish- and English-language media.²⁴ Moreover, Nielsen Media Research indicates that the mainstream viewing patterns for Latinas/os born or raised in the United States are closer

to white audiences than to other ethnic or racial minority audiences. Ethnic or racial minority audiences are more likely to watch shows and networks categorized as "minority programming," such as BET (Black Entertainment Television).²⁵ Thus, there is more overlap in the viewing patterns of top mainstream shows for second-generation U.S. Latina/o audiences and white audiences than there is between Latina/o and black audiences, with some notable exceptions such as *George Lopez* and, more recently, *Ugly Betty*.

Given *Ugly Betty's* focus on fashion, family, career, and romance, it is no surprise that most of its viewers are women. What is perhaps more interesting is that the women come from diverse ethnic, racial, and age backgrounds, a desirable but rare feat in television programming. For the 2006–2007 season, Nielsen Media Research reported the show among the Top Twenty programs for 18–49-year-olds and audiences who earn more than \$100,000 per year, two of the most coveted television and advertising demographics. In its first season, the show averaged 11.3 million viewers a week with 72 percent of its audience composed of women, 10.5 percent African Americans, and 9.25 percent Latinas/os.²⁶ Like Jennifer Lopez's movie *Selena*, *Ugly Betty* illustrates that Latina actors and characters may be employed to capture an ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse global audience. With the adoption of SAP (secondary audio programming that allows audiences to watch shows with audio in another language) by the mainstream networks, it is expected that Latin American and Spanish-dominant U.S. Latinas/os may be increasingly attracted to English-based programming, further raising the stakes for both Spanish- and English-language media in capturing audiences.

Producing a Panethnic Latina from Queens

In 2006, Salma Hayek and Ben Silverman, who co-owned the U.S. rights to *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea*, brought in U.S. Cuban Silvio Horta to create an English-language version of the telenovela.²⁷ Whereas class, ethnicity, and ethnic humor were often the source of comedy on *George Lopez*, both ethnicity and ethnic humor are carefully sublimated on *Ugly Betty*. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, for instance, Horta explained the shared vision of the program: "And creatively we [Horta, Hayek, Silverman] were all on the same page—telling the story of Betty as a young woman straddling these two worlds, trying to make her way in the American world, the gringo world, as this . . . Latina and this ugly duckling."²⁸ I argue that while the Betty character clearly must negotiate the demands of her white workplace with the demands of her Latina/o family, her ethnic-specific Mexican identity is rarely the focus

of the story lines. Indeed, it is most often her panethnic albeit campy performance of beauty and class that is the main source of humor and conflict.

References to Betty and her family's ethnic identity are rarely mentioned or significantly incorporated into the show's publicity and story lines, with the exception of the story line dealing with her father Ignacio's citizenship status. However, even the Ignacio Suarez (Tony Plana) story depoliticizes the immigration debate by handling it in a humorous and melodramatic fashion. For example, in the first season's over-the-top finale, Betty and her sister, Hilda Suarez (Ana Ortiz), travel to Mexico to help their father obtain a legal visa ("A Tree Grows in Guadalajara," originally aired May 10, 2007, and "East Side Story," originally aired May 17, 2007). The episode's story line mostly focuses on Hilda's search for a wedding dress and Betty's questions about her romantic life. While the sisters' trip to Mexico is one of the only instances in which their ethnic identity is the explicit source of humor, the comedy is mostly based on their adept acculturation to U.S. society and foreignness in Mexico. In particular, Betty's lack of Spanish fluency and knowledge about her Mexican heritage—undoubtedly a situation many young U.S. born Latinas/os can relate to—acts as a comedic and subtle marker of her outsider status in Mexico. In the only episodes set in Mexico so far, Hilda and Betty are depicted as much cultural fishes-out-of-water in Mexico as they are in the United States.

Interestingly, the decision to cast the New York family as specifically Mexican is perhaps more indicative of audience aspirations than its centrality to the show's story lines. Mexican residents make up the largest U.S. Latina/o ethnic group and the largest Latin American population in the United States, even though they are not the majority Latina/o population in New York City. When responding to an audience question about how the U.S. *Betty* character compares with those in other versions of the telenovela, Horta answered, "[S]he is vastly different. This comes from cultural differences, my writing choices, America Ferrera's acting choices, and so on. The shape and premise of the series is the same, but the characters, their stories, their voice, etc. are different."²⁹ Betty is not the Latin American heroine of the telenovelas or the Latina archetypes familiar in U.S. popular culture. As a career-oriented, second-generation college graduate, Betty is defined by her more assimilated behavior, in particular her inability to speak Spanish and her lack of interest in Spanish-language music and television. Although negotiating the two cultures is a part of the program's story lines, the show's central stories pay little attention to Betty's Mexican identity, focusing instead around the family's perseverance, moral rectitude, inevitable success, and inherent nobility.

ity. Consequently, the producers' ethnic-specific focus on an English-fluent Mexican character who has incorporated the cultural practices of living in the United States is a conscious and deliberate choice.

By tapping into a more assimilated construction of Mexican identity as well as more universal story lines regarding the human condition, the show produces a less ethnically and racially marked Mexican family that is more internationally marketable. Similar to the show's characters, the Latina/o actors who play them also occupy complicated identity spaces. Indeed, none of the key actors on the show identifies as Mexican—Ferrera identifies as Latin or Honduran, Plana as Cuban, and Ortiz as Puerto Rican. Ferrera, born and raised in Los Angeles, came of age identifying as white or "American." Ortiz, whose father is a major Puerto Rican politician in Philadelphia and who wed her husband in Puerto Rico, has only recently acknowledged her Irish American maternal roots. Finally, the Cuban Plana made a career playing Mexican characters in U.S. television and film. *Ugly Betty's* Latina/o characters and the three actors who play them demonstrate the blurring of Latina/o ethnic distinctions and privileging of panethnicity necessary for globally commodifiable television depictions of Latinidad.

I Am Betty, La Global Latina

Horta widely credits the pilot's rave reviews at the 2006 Television Critics Association for initially saving *Ugly Betty* from the dead zone of Friday night television.³⁰ As the previous chapter discussed, journalists function as textual mediators who speak to broader cultural readings of the show. In particular, television critics, as journalists who specialize in writing about media culture, actively participate in defining popular tastes and determining what programs are culturally acceptable. What is emphasized by television critics in reviewing *Ugly Betty* is therefore informative of how critics make sense of the program and simultaneously frame the program for audiences.

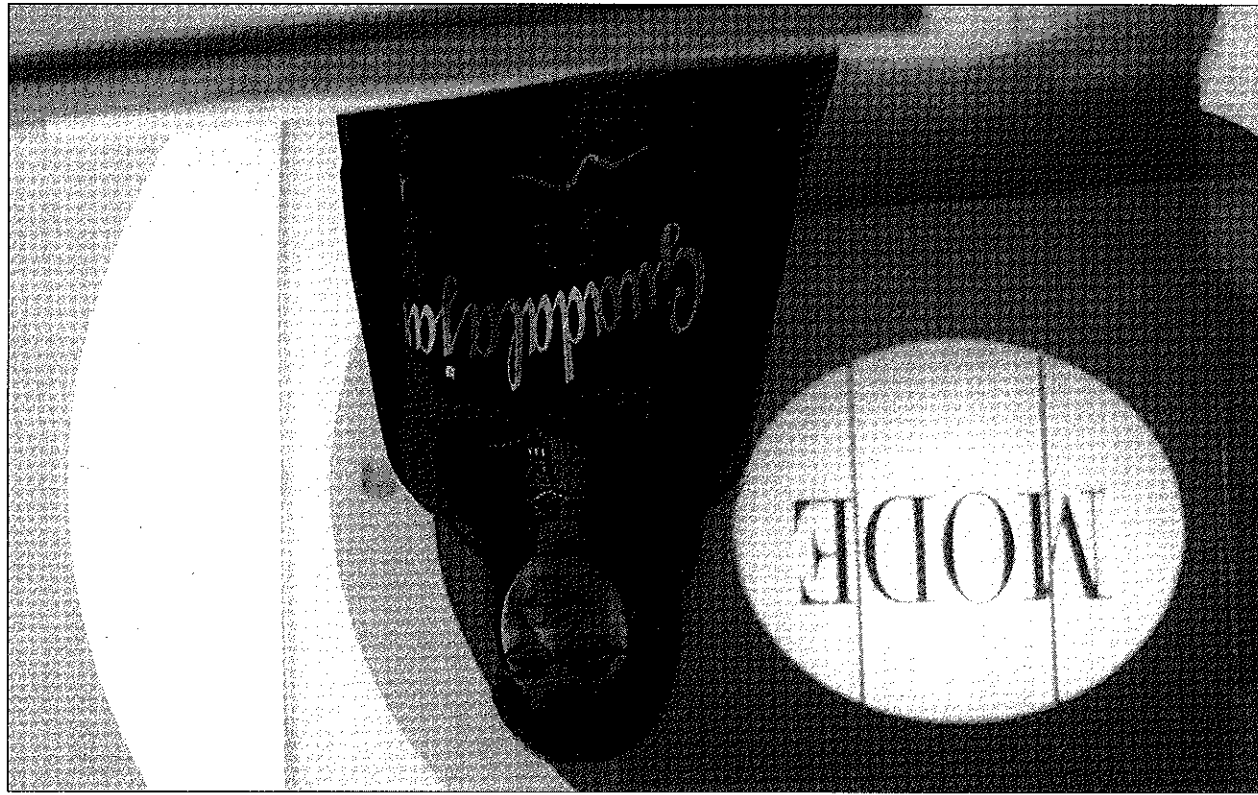
U.S. television critics initially emphasized the show's more universally compelling story lines, such as the continuing "fish out of water" theme. With headlines such as "Likable 'Betty' Aided by a Lovable Lead," "The Main Character May Not Be Pretty, but Her Show Is," and "A Plucky Guppy among the Barracudas," newspaper reviews highlighted the more universal appeal of the show.³¹ Foregrounding the program's American dream ideology, mainstream television critics of the pilot rarely mentioned the specific Mexican ethnicity of Betty or her family as significant to audiences enjoying the show.³² On the rare occasion Betty's ethnicity is mentioned, it is more often than not con-

flated with a panethnic “Latin” or “Latin America” identity. Tom Shales of the *Washington Post*, for example, described Betty “as a very Americanized Latin American, one partial to such fashion statements as a huge red poncho with the word ‘Guadalajara’ embroidered across the front” (see figure 4.1).³³ Betty and her poncho are not Latin American. She is a U.S.-born citizen, and the poncho is from Mexico. Yet, in one brief sentence, the ethnic specificity of Betty and the Guadalajara poncho are sublimated. Guadalajara, located in the Mexican state of Jalisco, has an established history of immigration to the United States. Nevertheless, Betty and her attire are decontextualized as one more “Americanized Latin American” sign of her gauche taste and naïve, oddball personality. Overall, the journalistic discussion of the program encouraged viewers to focus on Betty as an “ugly duck,” not Betty as the daughter of Mexican immigrants from Guadalajara. She is rarely labeled by the reviewers as Mexican, a more racialized ethnic identity; she is a safely assimilated Latin or Latin American.

Television critics such as Maureen Ryan of the *Chicago Tribune* further reaffirm the show’s liberal ideology, noting, “Those who can identify with Betty’s plight—anyone who has ever felt like the ugly duckling among swans, any veteran of battles fought not with fists but with cutting remarks and exclusion—should find a lot to like.”³⁴ International journalists also emphasize the “underdog quality” of the show, such as a 2007 story in London’s *Sunday Express* that quotes Ferrara as saying, “It’s all about wanting her to succeed against the odds because she tries so damn hard.”³⁵ By situating the Betty character as the oddball, reviewers define the show as “more than” a new take on Latina/o programming. While Hilda (in what is perhaps a reference to the more racially coded Latina harlot stereotype) is described as Betty’s “slutty sister,”³⁶ Betty is always defined through ethnic and racially neutral terms. For example, a *Denver Post* critic described Betty as “Jane Doe, a woman who is a little overweight, a bit klutzy, and could use a bit of help in the style department. In other words, you and me.”³⁷ For the television reviewers, the essence of Betty is that she can be anyone, you *and* me. Betty’s ethnicity, race, and sexuality—her social identity—is less significant to the heart of the show than her actions, work ethic, and idealized morals. My analysis of journalistic reviews of the program is not meant to suggest that television journalists unproblematically circulate the intended messages of the program’s producers. Rather, it draws attention to how the show’s themes and story lines align with well-established media renditions of the American dream.

Journalists reinforce the ideology of the American dream by sublimating interpretations of the show based predominantly on specific ethnic or racial

Figure 4.1. The photograph of Betty Suarez (America Ferrera) wearing her red and yellow Guadalajara poncho to work was widely used by entertainment journalists in stories about the show. Not only did the Guadalajara poncho mark Betty as Mexican, or at the very least Latina, but the class signifiers of her clothes also situated her within a more universal working-class sphere.



identity. Minimizing the importance of ethnic specificity in favor of a more homogenized characterization of Latina identity contributes to the symbolic colonization of Latinidad. In her essay on Jennifer Lopez's representation of Selena, Frances Aparicio argues that the homogenization of Latina identity is typical of most mainstream media, noting a Latina actor "is discursively defined in the public sphere because of her generalizability as a Latina rather than because of her uniqueness as a Boricua or a Mexican American or Cuban American."³⁸ *Ugly Betty* reviews similarly engage in a blurring of Latina ethnic distinctions. Most reviewers did not discuss the ethnic identity of the characters, but some journalists did point to the program's use of stereotyped Latina/o characteristics.³⁹ However, even journalists who were critical of the producers' attempt to homogenize the ethnic identity of the characters still applauded the show for its universal telenovela appeal across ethnic and racial groups.⁴⁰

America: A Real Woman Like Betty

A central component of the program's global appeal is the universal, likeable title character and the seemingly authentic celebrity persona of America Ferrera. Both journalists and producers consistently draw attention to the convergence between actor and character. For example, in interviews, Ferrera often describes herself as average, a misfit, one of those people who don't quite belong but who are inherently good and valuable. During an interview with *TV Guide*, Ferrera argued: "The truth is, we are not all people who look like we belong on television. But every single person you look at, they are the heroine of their own lives. There are people who love them and desire them and need them."⁴¹ Ferrera is Betty and Betty is Ferrera; both can relate to the personal struggle of fitting in.

As the sixth and youngest child of Honduran immigrants, Ferrera says she had plenty of fish-out-of-water moments growing up in the predominantly Caucasian community of Woodland Hills, California. "As early as second grade I remember feeling really different and isolated," she says. "I had the hugest crush on a boy, and my best friend had a crush on him too. One day he said to me, 'I like your best friend more because she's paler and she has freckles.' And it was right then that I began to feel like, Oh wow, I'm different." At the same time, she says, she never felt like she fit in with the Latino community. "I mean, I grew up in the Valley," she says. "All my friends were white Jewish kids. So the Latino kids thought I was this white girl."⁴²

Ferrera's willingness to share these seemingly intimate accounts about her life allows journalists and audiences to read her as a sincere and "real" person. Public performances of Ferrera as a "real woman" are key for producing positive publicity about the show. Discussing the appeal of the program, for example, Salma Hayek and Silvio Horta consciously blur the differences between Ferrera and Betty's life, between "reality" and fiction. In a May 2007 *W Magazine* article, Hayek said Ferrera is "one of the most charismatic people I've ever met. . . . She's also authentic. That's a rare characteristic nowadays, and that's why people are falling in love with her."⁴³ Ben Silverman, an executive producer of the show, reiterated the same sentiment, saying "there's no bulls--- with her. . . . It doesn't matter what makeup or hair or clothing she has on, she's so real that she grabs you. She's a very connected human being, and that really empowers her as an actor."⁴⁴ The merging of actor and character is not a new or novel publicity strategy, but it is nevertheless significant in framing public reception of the program.

In his book about celebrity culture, Joshua Gamson argues that promoting the emotional sincerity of actors by drawing attention to the similarity with their characters is a well-established strategy going back to the golden studio age of Hollywood.⁴⁵ Audiences want to believe that the actors who portray the sassy and naughty or good and noble characters they admire are themselves actually sassy and naughty or good and noble. In the case of *Ugly Betty*, online discussion boards, blogs, and entertainment coverage are pivotal to establishing the link between the actors and the characters. That Ferrera embodies genuine and wholesome "American" values makes it easier to promote Ferrera, Betty, and the program. The close relationship between the "good" qualities of the character and those of Ferrera as a "real" woman is thus significant to fans and audiences of the program. Many of the early postings on the ABC Web site's *Ugly Betty* discussion board consciously or subconsciously conflate the actor with the character, such as the post, "Is ugly Betty ugly, ok, or beautiful?????"⁴⁶ Although the initial posting asks if "Betty" is beautiful, it is clear by the responses that what audiences want to know is if the actor is really like Betty. All the responses to the initial post center around discussions of America Ferrera, the actor who portrays the character, her real physical appearance, and her off-screen personality.⁴⁷ Some fans wanted Ferrera to be "ugly" as evidence of the show's sincerity, while others quickly wanted to affirm Ferrera's beauty as proof of the show's quality and her acting ability. Regardless, a majority of the posters desired to know that Ferrera's real-life beauty, morals, and values matched those of the television heroine they adored.

Consequently, among fans there is a careful filtering of information about Ferrera that might work against their readings of the character and actor. For instance, in a post entitled "America Ferrera should stick with acting and stay out of politics," a fan disciplines Ferrera for her involvement in Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. Such postings point to the conventions that surround the blurring of actor and character.⁴⁸ Fans wanting to maintain the suspension of disbelief that character and actor are one sometimes police Ferrera for actions that do not fit their assumptions. Additionally, to maintain the aura that Ferrera is just like Betty, Ferrera must carefully manage information about her real life. After all, Ferrera as Betty cannot perform the role of everywoman if she too closely embodies an ethnic identity or holds specific political beliefs. The carefully managed publicity accounts of Betty and Ferrera as "real" people once again depend on the universal appeal of both character and actor. Ferrera's persona as an average woman is key to her global appeal and *Ugly Betty's* popularity. Perhaps a few pounds lighter and more glamorous than when she first appeared on the Hollywood scene as the provocative, slightly overweight, burgeoning high school feminist in *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), Ferrera's audience appeal continues to rest on her ordinariness. To the show's fans, for instance, Ferrera's tearful acceptance of her first acting award for best actress at the 2007 Golden Globe Awards added to their perception that she was a real woman portraying real women like them:

Thank you so humbly for recognizing this show and this character, who is truly bringing a new face to television and such a beautiful, beautiful message about beauty that lies deeper than what we see. And it's such an honor to play a role that I hear from young girls on a daily basis how it makes them feel worthy and lovable and that they have more to offer the world than what they thought, and it's such an honor to play this role.⁴⁹

Demonstrating the importance of Ferrera's and Betty's authenticity to her fans, this open letter to Ferrera regarding her acceptance speech illustrates the emotional link between the fans, the actor, and the character.

I found myself openly weeping with you as you took the stage to accept your Golden Globe award for "Best Actress" on Monday night. . . . As a young Latina feminist, I wanted to shout from the rooftop of my building my congratulations to you and to say thank you—thank you for exemplifying the class, ethnic and body ideals of this woman and of real women the world over.⁵⁰

Although the blogger draws attention to the Latina panethnicity of the actor and character, more importantly she engages emotionally with Betty's supposed "ugliness" and Ferrera's "real life" social consciousness as the real women at the heart of the program's reception.

Her acceptance speech affirmed the connection between actor and character for journalists as well, such as in the lead to this Australian profile of the show: "When an emotional America Ferrera thanked her 'mummy' during her acceptance speech as this year's Golden Globe Award winner for Best TV Actress (Comedy or Musical), her tears were the real thing."⁵¹ Ferrera and Betty become interchangeable; one embodies the other. The emphasis on the down-to-earth nature of the actor and character allows *Ugly Betty* to resonate globally within and across national, ethnic, racial, and gender subjectivities.

However, Betty's and Ferrera's global popularity require that the ethnic-specific context of Ferrera as a second-generation Honduran and Betty as a U.S. Mexican be sublimated into the more common experience of and desire for social acceptance. The sublimation of ethnic specificity is duly emphasized by journalists, both in the United States and internationally, as well as by the show's producers and lead actor. For example, in an interview with the *Sunday Mail* in Australia, Ferrera emphasizes Betty's universality when she says, "what I love most about Betty being a Latina is that it's not a banner she carries with her. . . . It's not a show about a Latina girl; it's a show about a girl with problems who just happens to be a Latina."⁵² It is precisely Betty's universality, not her specificity, that appeals most to fans across gender and national identities, as is evident in this *Los Angeles Times* story about a Trinidadian fan of the show:

"We all like the show, and nobody should be ashamed of that," said Seon McDonald, 20, a Trinidad and Tobago native who lives in Brooklyn, N.Y. "Betty is someone who is trying to fit in. It goes to how I felt on my first day of college, you know, you feel a little bit odd. I can relate to her in the sense that she's not like everybody else."⁵³

McDonald is neither a woman, nor Mexican, nor Latina/o. He does not mention his racial or ethnic identity, yet it is important for interpreting his response. An immigrant from a predominantly Afro-Caribbean island, McDonald is presumably the outsider trying to socially and economically move upward in a foreign culture, the outsider trying to achieve the American dream.

Writing about the character he most identifies with, another male fan wrote on the popular Web site uglybettynews.com:

I am most like Betty. I was the kid who didn't go to proms, from a working class family, with no sense of style. I have gone into the world as I am (if they ever "pretty" Betty up, you'll find the worst rant you've ever seen on this site). . . . I love Betty Suarez, I see myself in her, because she just goes out there and does it, and makes people question what they think about "the way things are."⁵⁴

Like McDonald, this fan's commonality with Betty is not so much about her gender or ethnoracial identity but about her more universal appeal and the seductive call of the American dream. Betty's working-class roots, non-normative performance of beauty, and desire to make it against the odds tap into global demands for more universally compelling stories. The responses of these male fans illustrate how the program's, actor's, and producers' performance of deracialized panethnicity inform readings of the show across national, gender, ethnic, and racial lines.

Symbolically Colonizing the Latina Dream

If Hilda functions as the more racialized ethnic character (the bilingual, telenovela-loving, strong-willed, hot-headed, curvaceous daughter who gets pregnant outside marriage in high school), then the socially awkward Betty occupies a less racialized panethnic role, the role of the good, self-sacrificing Latina *señorita*. In other words, Hilda is the brown Latina "bad girl," Betty is the "good" ambiguous Latina. As the "good girl" who relegates her ethnic identity to the backstage, Betty is the cornerstone of the program's liberal logic and universal appeal.

Although Betty has become slightly more sexualized since the first season, her overall role as the deracialized, panethnic, morally good, asexual, "ugly girl" making it in the big city has remained constant. Throughout the series, the plot and dialogue carefully emphasize Betty's sexually innocent, morally good, and maternal nature. For example, in the first season episode "Four Thanksgivings and a Funeral" (originally aired November 16, 2006), her caregiving responsibilities at work and home pull her in opposite directions. On the home front, Betty must cope with shopping and cooking for Thanksgiving dinner as well as finding a lawyer for her undocumented immigrant father. At the same time, she must juggle her "work" responsibilities, simulta-

neously nurturing her heartbroken boss, Daniel Meade (Eric Mabius). When Daniel pulls her away from Thanksgiving dinner to ask for dating wardrobe advice, Betty responds by walking out and stating, "I know that this might be a surprise to you, but I have a life, too, and a family that counts on me a lot. They already think that I put you in front of them. My dad has immigration problems. My sister may have hired a shady lawyer. And it's up to me to fix it." Similar to many working women, Betty must balance her nurturing role at home with the demand of work without letting go of her maternal status and obligations—the ultimate self-sacrificing woman. Although her ethnicity is sublimated in the dialogue and plot—with the exception of the immigration lawyer subplot—her racially unmarked panethnic Latina identity subtly informs the character's immigrant work ethic and almost suffocating commitment to family.

After Hilda loses the family's savings in an immigration lawyer scam, it is Betty who performs the symbolic role of mother and nurturer. Preparing her mother's traditional Mexican dessert for Thanksgiving, Betty takes responsibility for her sister's mistake:

BETTY: Well at least you've been trying to help. I didn't make it to Justin's pageant. Maybe this stupid job isn't worth it.

HILDA: You can't live your life for your family, Betty. You've been taking care of us since mom died, and maybe it's time for us to stop relying on you so much.

BETTY: Well, I like that you rely on me. Taking care of the family is the one thing I knew I could do. I wasn't ever going to be the pretty one.

Betty may not shine at *Mode* or in her romantic relationships, but her symbolic role as self-sacrificing nurturer is solidified. This episode, like many others during the first two seasons, significantly draws out Betty's role as mother/nurturer through the established archetypes of panethnic Latina femininity without racializing the character.

In the 2008–2009 season, the show's producers are slowly moving away from more familiar representations of Latinidad and Betty's symbolic role as the self-sacrificing Latina. Drawing on the more universal trope of the American dream, in the third season Betty leaves her family and strikes out on her own in a cross-country trip, rents an apartment in downtown Manhattan, and achieves professional success at *Mode*. Still providing the moral compass of the show, Betty is less defined by the archetype of the self-sacrificing Latina mother. Evocative of the trajectory of millions of young U.S. adults,

Betty's role as the family's maternal nurturer and main financial provider becomes less significant. She still must balance her work with the needs of her family, but the parameters of her personal life have become more universally similar than ethnically distinct from the diverse audiences who watch the program. The audience expectations for the character's ethnic assimilation and upward mobility might explain the backlash against the creative decision to have Betty return to her father's house after his hospitalization later in the third season.

Betty could be any working woman struggling to juggle family and work, and in that sense the universal themes that define her story lines associate the character with a more assimilated and less racialized performance of ethnic identity. Betty's successes are the achievements of anyone struggling to make better lives for themselves and their families. When she's at home she is ethnically contextualized by panethnic signifiers of Latina identity and culture, but at work Betty's more assimilated performance of Latina femininity, her subtle difference, is brought to the foreground through a failed performance of white middle-class social acceptability. As she spends more time away from home and her family, Betty's panethnic performance of *Latinidad* is less pivotal to the story lines. She is a Latina, sometimes, but an ugly-duckling working-class girl always. Betty's duality allows the program to market itself as a Latina/o show with broad global appeal to universal values and the ideology of liberalism.

For example, in the show's premier episode, Betty tries to fit in at the glamorous magazine by reporting to her first day of work with a bright red poncho purchased by her father in Guadalajara (see figure 4.1). A splash of red and yellow in an otherwise monochrome white environment, Betty is immediately surveyed and disciplined by the show's arbiter of white upper-class femininity, Amanda Tanen (Becky Newton). Amanda, who often serves as a comedic foil to emphasize Betty's ethnoracial- and class-outsider status within the elite world of high fashion, greets Betty and her Guadalajara poncho with the ethnically coded question, "Oh, my God. Are you the before and after shoot? (In slow, loud English) Are—you—de—li—ver—ing—some—thing?" Betty's initial introduction to Amanda sets the tone for the program's consistent use of class markers to sublimate her ethnic and racial difference. By placing the white Amanda in a position of power and privilege, Betty's treatment can be interpreted as racially motivated. Amanda's character assumes that only a "non-American" and presumably nonwhite Latina unable to speak English would wear such a hideous clothing item. However, the dominant reading of the poncho by

most reviewers and audiences has actually been based on class and not ethnic notions of difference. Betty's class difference is further emphasized in the episode through a previous scene featuring a white model's more acceptable Prada version of a poncho. Betty is a foreigner to the corporate white world and economically elite world of high fashion. Her fashion sense, not her ethnicity, defines her as working class and not ethnically white.

Invoking class signifiers to communicate Betty's difference allows the producers to avoid associating her with the more racialized constructions of *Latinidad* that mark her sister, Hilda, such as speaking in Spanish, Spanglish, or English with a Spanish accent. When Betty shows up for work in an over-the-top outfit put together by Hilda, Wilhelmina responds by quipping, "It looks like Queens threw up." Such a carefully crafted line foregrounds Betty's class difference and shifts her ethnic identity to the story's background. Among New York's racially and economically segregated boroughs, Queens has historically been associated with working-class white ethnic immigrants. Indeed, it is interesting that the program locates Betty's family in Queens, a borough not usually linked with Latinas/os in the popular media. According to a 2006 U.S. Census estimate, Queens is still predominantly non-Latina/o white, making up 31.3 percent of the population, with Latina/o residents the second largest category at 26.5 percent.⁵⁵ Additionally, Mexican immigrants are most likely to live in Manhattan's East Harlem barrio, a particularly classed and racialized space once predominantly inhabited by Puerto Rican migrants.⁵⁶ By choosing to cast the characters as Mexicans living in Queens, the show acknowledges that U.S. Mexicans make up the country's largest Latina/o population but erases the current racialized geopolitics of New York City. Puerto Rican migrants followed by Dominican immigrants are the city's largest two Latina/o groups. Constructing a New York space with a Mexican family living in a historically non-Latina/o neighborhood allows the show to situate Betty's character within a less racially determined and more universally resonant setting.

Ugly Betty carefully manages the two sisters' performance of panethnic *Latinidad*. The hyperfeminine urban, working-class acculturated Hilda constantly wears and performs her classed and racialized Latina identity. Betty, however, must increasingly occupy an assimilated ethnic identity. Unlike Hilda, Betty's academic and cultural education allows her to move and work, albeit problematically, within a world of white wealth and privilege. Furthermore, Betty's inability to normatively perform neither Latina nor white beauty becomes part of a more universal story line grounded in the logic of

liberalism by focusing on the themes of self-pride, social acceptance, and the value of individuality. Employing Betty and her family's ethnic identity as a unique but sublimated marker of difference allows the program to speak to broader audiences inside and outside the United States.

The Cosbying of Latinidad

In their pioneering audience study on *The Cosby Show*, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis conclude that the characters' upper-class identity and the story lines' middle-class values encouraged white viewers to ignore race in such a way that it permitted white audiences to absolve themselves of social responsibility for ongoing racial prejudices and discrimination in the United States and allowed black audiences an escapist moment of media pleasure.⁵⁷ Although elements of U.S. black history and culture were consistently incorporated into the show, the plot lines and characters' development revolved around issues faced by many middle-class families regardless of race. Heteronormative story lines about high school romances, wedding anniversaries, and family dinners overshadowed the program's always-present but subtle acknowledgments of Martin Luther King, Jr. or the civil rights movement. White audiences comfortably tuned in to watch *The Cosby Show* in record numbers, allowing them to romanticize racial equality and the normalcy of their own families. On the other hand, for U.S. black audiences, the program's success depended on its uncompromisingly positive depiction of black middle-class respectability.⁵⁸ Because so few positive images of the black middle class existed in the mainstream media, the show's portrayals of respectability, dignity, and nobility resonated with black audiences long excluded from the semiotic world of television. On a global level, *Cosby's* international appeal stemmed from the logic of U.S. liberalism grounded in media representations of idealized racial equity. The show's record-setting international syndication set the standard for other situation comedies featuring ethnic and racial minority characters—depicting an ethnic or racial minority family that is respectable and well behaved, not too racial or too ethnic, preferably middle class, and always heteronormative.⁵⁹

Ugly Betty clearly follows some of the elements of the *Cosby* formula. Betty's ethnic identity is neither a central part of her character's development nor the program's central story lines, especially during the 2008–2009 season. The more ethnic-specific story lines, such as Ignacio's undocumented

immigration status, nod to the contemporary politics of immigration dominating the U.S. public sphere but do so in an entertaining and ideologically safe manner. Ironically, the first season story line regarding Ignacio's immigration status played out against a real-world background where the United States came close to approving virulently anti-immigration congressional legislation. Millions of news viewers watched record-breaking numbers of immigration-rights activists mobilize for the right to remain in the United States as Ignacio voluntarily returned to Mexico in first-class accommodations. The producers' and writers' decision to reduce Ignacio's story to a melodrama of extramarital romance, family feuds, corporate intrigue, and Disneylike images of Mexico and the border diffuses any potential political backlash against the show. That is, the surreal or unreal characterization of undocumented immigration neutralizes overtly political readings of the show. In 2009, there is growing speculation on the discussion boards that Ignacio will be killed off—allowing the producers to further situate Hilda's and Betty's trajectory away from brownness.

The program's treatment of Ignacio's undocumented status is representative of televisual practices that symbolically colonize Latinidad through the seemingly benevolent trope of the American dream rather than through the gendering and racialization evident in the book's first three case studies. For instance, in the episode "Trust, Lust and Must" (originally aired November 2, 2006), the Suarez family visits an immigration lawyer. Upon learning that the father could be deported, Betty responds by saying, "But he has a family; he pays taxes; he's a Mets fan." To which Hilda adds, "He's in the Oprah Book Club." The sisters' dialogue characterizes Ignacio as an "average American" instead of an "illegal alien" by humanizing him in ways that resonate with audiences across ethnic, racial, and gender categories. Ignacio may not be a citizen, but he's a moral and law-abiding man who pays his taxes. He may be Mexican, but unlike Hilda's hypermasculine fiancé, Santos (Kevin Alejandro), his racialized masculinity is coded as less brown and therefore less threatening. After all, Ignacio cooks the family's meals, nurtures his daughters, and reads Oprah's women-centered book selections. *Ugly Betty* effectively humanizes Ignacio as a globally familiar and idealized father figure. Ignacio's love for his daughters, grandson, and deceased wife trumps any negative associations with his ethnic identity or legal status. Like Cliff Huxtable of *The Cosby Show*, both men soothe the dominant gender constructions of black and Latino masculinity through their deracialized, acculturated, and sensitive affect.

Sublimating Ethnicity, Resisting Race

Because ethnicity and race are not central to the show's American dream premise, it is not surprising that the most interesting fan discussions revolve around the disciplining of potential ethnic and racial readings of the show. On the ABC discussion board, for instance, a poster's claim that a line by Wilhelmina was racist toward white people drew numerous and heated responses. The original post argued: "Twice in one week an ABC Racist remark in Primetime Show. The line by the Queen BEE 'Standing here like a couple of White [crackers]'. But then maybe it is ok to slur 'White People NOT!'"⁶⁰ Responses to the post contradicted the racialized reading of the dialogue by claiming that the remark was inoffensive because the show was an "equal opportunity offender."⁶¹ Since the program is critical of everyone without respect to ethnicity, race, gender, or sexuality, posters suggested it is not possible for the show to be racist. In other words, posters claimed the show was not and its audiences should not racially code its characters or humor. Reading race into a show premised on a Mexican family living in the United States was resisting the program's message of universality.

Some audiences' resistance to ethnic or racial readings of the program is further evidenced in their discussion of Betty's relationships. Betty has never dated an identifiable Latino character. Throughout the series, Betty has taken part in a series of multiracial/multiethnic romances and crushes, in particular her long-term romance with Henry Grubstick (Christopher Gorcham). Yet on a now-defunct fan Web site devoted to fan fiction and depictions of the Betty-Henry romance, nary a reference to the characters' ethnic and racial identities could be found. The screenwriters' decision to highlight the characters' awkward similarities as social misfits over their ethnorracial differences resonates more easily with audiences than any representations of potential cultural differences.

Indeed, the second season's introduction of an ethnically ambiguous romantic rival, Gio, played by Puerto Rican actor Freddy Rodriguez, threatened the show's liberal color-blind premise, creating tensions among some fans on the ABC discussion board. Gio troubled race-neutral readings of the program by introducing an uncomfortable level of ambiguity. Although *Ugly Betty*'s writers carefully kept Gio's ethnic identity neutral (his name, Giovanni Rossi, could be Latina/o or Italian), his previous Latino roles, such as Federico Diaz on HBO's *Six Feet Under*, clearly led some audiences to read him as ethnic. Unlike the WASPy Henry, the signifiers surrounding Gio (his accent, clothes, and mannerisms) produce an ethnic working-class identity.⁶²

On the ABC discussion board, fans' reactions to Gio have been strong, with many eager to subtract ethnicity and race from the conversation:

As other posters have noted, Gio is no bum. He's a hard-working, fairly honest, funny, nice guy (c'mon, he gave the extra ticket to his bratty sister!). There's no real stereotype except the ones people choose to highlight. Besides, the whole show is a caricature, so why aren't people complaining more about Marc being a stereotypical gay character, or Amanda being a stereotypical skinny monster, or Hilda being a stereotypical Latino woman? Because the show is about the idea of stereotypes.⁶³

Critiques of Gio as stereotypically Latino, Italian, or ethnic are contested, not on the grounds that they are offensive but rather on the belief that racial readings are irrelevant. Because every character is a stereotype, no stereotypes matter on the show.

Fans who engage in racialized readings of the characters or story lines are in turn policed on the discussion board. For instance, in fan discussions about which character is a better fit for Betty (Daniel, Gio, or Henry), the characters' ethnic and racial identities are rarely mentioned as important.⁶⁴ Love, romance, and sexual desire are incorporated into the race-neutral liberal logic of the program. When ethnicity is brought into the fan discussion, audiences often negate its importance, such as this discussion regarding Gio:

I don't think that a guy being a better fit into the family is a way to judge who is better for Betty. Duh Gio is might be a better fit then Henry, he is latin so there is not cultrue differences to deal with. I also think Betty's family is not that keen on Henry b/c of the whole baby thing. Being latin myself and having dated white guys it can be a little wried but all that matters is that they care to try, like Henry looking a fool while dancing.⁶⁵

The more universal theme of fitting in supersedes stories about ethnic or racial conflict. If Gio is indeed Latino, the poster raises a valid concern regarding potential differences in cultural values; nevertheless, her comments inevitably argue against the importance of ethnic or racial identity. The majority of the comments in response to the above post, however, would rather discuss the proper use of the terms *Latín* and *Latina* than the issue of mixed-race dating or the ethnic and racial differences between the characters. Most who responded agreed that, in the end, the ethnicity of Gio or Henry did not matter because love, after all, is a universal human experience.

Postings about perhaps the most ethnically and racially marked character, Hilda, equally demonstrate the complicated negotiations surrounding the show. Hilda's hyper-stereotypical performance of Latina identity is recuperated by the program's liberal logic and the trope of the American dream. Although some posters might not look, sound, or dress like Hilda, they relate to her insecurities, emotional vulnerability, struggle as a single mother, and equally ambitious desire for economic and professional success. Discussion board responses to the 2007–2008 season premiere in which her fiancé's death is confirmed exemplify the complex ideological manner through which her character is read.⁶⁶ Fans exchanged emotional stories, often reflecting on their personal vulnerability and sincere grief over Santos' death. Without mentioning the stereotypical markers of Latina femininity that overwhelmingly define the character, audiences resonated with Hilda's working-class nobility, lost chance at love, and the unpredictable nature of life. Having patiently watched Santos blossom from a "neighborhood thug" into a good father and loving fiancé, fans felt betrayed by the producers' denial of Hilda's Cinderella ending. To discussion board participants, Hilda was not a Latina spitfire but another working-class everywoman trying to succeed against the odds. Once again, racial and ethnic readings of the character are sublimated in favor of a more universal, classed and gendered reading of the show. Hilda might provide the program's Latin spice, but both women's ethnic difference is mediated by the program's overall message of universal worth and social acceptance.

Queering "Americas" Dreams

My analysis thus far explores the sublimation of ethnic specificity in the production of globally commodifiable panethnic Latina/o cultural visibility. However, for the remainder of this chapter, I would like to shift gears by examining how the representations of gender and sexuality partially rupture the homogenized deracialized representation of Latinidad. I purposefully use the word *partially* because the program's representations of gender and sexuality also contribute to the ideology of meritocracy central to the trope of the American dream.

I invoke the term *queer* as more than a word used to identify gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Instead, I build on Michael Warner's discussion of the term as problematizing identity politics by looking at the intersections of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality in ways that challenge dominant assumptions about identity.⁶⁷ In particular, I focus on

Ugly Betty's use of queer camp. Queer camp engages in humor based on irony, melodrama, exaggeration, and bad taste.⁶⁸ It takes what is perceived as "normal" and makes it self-referentially funny and strange and sometimes tragically sad. Throughout the final section of this chapter, I think through the lens of queerness and queer camp to suggest they can symbolically rupture the deracialized homogenization of Latinidad, Latina/o family, and Latina identity. Specifically, I argue that writer-producer Horta, an out gay U.S. Cuban, introduces a queer sensibility to the program that potentially troubles the homogenizing depiction of a deracialized and heteronormative Latinidad.

Betty's in Universal Drag

Describing the lead character's public appeal, Horta once said, "I think there's a bit of Betty in all of us. It doesn't matter what you look like or how much money you have; everyone at some point in their life feels like they're an outsider."⁶⁹ Most of Betty's story lines, therefore, can be read through the performance of the queer outsider, the person who is just a little bit strange, who is similar and Other. Summarizing the queer text of *Ugly Betty*, Michael Jensen, editor of the GLBT Web site AfterElton.com, argues that the program's queerness does not rest on the show's recurring GLBT characters, representations of gay Manhattan, or the politics of the high-fashion world but instead on the message of self-worth and social acceptance that informs the stories about its title character, Betty:

Ironically, the character who most embodies the show's (queer) sensibility isn't Marc, Alexis, or Justin; it is the straight Betty Suarez herself. Betty is quintessential outsider: the ugly duckling whose beauty is on the inside waiting to be spotted by the right guy. She is the outcast with her nose pressed to the window waiting to be on the inside with the cool kids who reject her.⁷⁰

Betty is the ugly duckling, the outsider, the one hiding underneath gaudiness. Her outsider status—her slight degree of strangeness—present barriers in love and at work. Indeed, the entire premise of the show is based on the fact that Daniel Meade's father hires Betty as Daniel's assistant because she would never be sexually attractive to his promiscuous son. Betty is not feminine enough—or is too weirdly feminine—to be sexually desirable to Daniel.

Betty's queer performance is evident in her unusual sense of fashion and style that echoes a drag queen aesthetic. Drag queen aesthetics, such as those employed by black drag queen RuPaul, take familiar signifiers of femininity accepted as normal and beautiful and exaggerate them to reveal their artifice. In drag, the hair is a little bigger, the makeup a tad more garish, the breasts larger, the curves rounder, and the clothes more revealing than what is generally socially accepted in white heterosexual culture. Drag performance employs exaggeration to draw attention to the constructed nature of beauty, sexuality, gender, and race. By employing a drag aesthetic, the program subverts or symbolically ruptures preexisting notions of heteronormative Latina identity.

From clothing to shoes to hairstyles, every production decision is carefully planned and executed to maximize the emotional, visual, and queer impact of the show. As Horta, who is responsible for maintaining a cohesive vision of the character and the show, notes, "We treat the clothes . . . as seriously as the characters."⁷¹ Similar to the original telenovela heroine, Betty's exaggerated enjoyment of gaudy colors, textures, and jewelry are key elements of manufacturing the show's queerness. Not coincidentally, one British journalist makes a pejorative queer reading of the show by arguing Betty is "styled to appear not merely ugly but gay man grotesque."⁷² It is queer and grossly different from dominant mainstream media signifiers stereotypically coded as Latina. Although Betty has long black hair, it is frizzy and untamed (see figure 4.2). Her dark, thick eyebrows are bushy and unmanicured. Her lips are full but she also sports metal braces. She wears bright tropical clothing but in garishly clashing colors and patterns. She is feminine, but, at least in the first two seasons, did not wear makeup or high heels. Betty embodies exaggerated Latin flavors without the stereotypical media resonances of Latina heterosexual femininity. Her sense of fashion is familiar and funny and slightly wrong—a little bit queer—by the standards of Latinidad familiar to television audiences.

Consequently, like the telenovela upon which it is based, Betty's changing fashion sense in the 2008–2009 season is also symbolic of her journey toward upward mobility and ethnoracial assimilation. As Betty has become more of the independent "American girl" throughout the third season of the show, her queer sense of style has been toned down. Commenting to *Variety* on Betty's evolving wardrobe in the third season, Horta said, "Betty's new wardrobe illustrates the changes Betty is making in her life—not the changes *Mode* is making in Betty's life. That is to say, Betty is evolving—she's growing up according to her own ideals, but she's changing nevertheless."⁷³ Although Betty remains the outsider, later seasons of the show have made her more familiar through the character's performance of a socially acceptable con-



Figure 4.2. Betty Suarez (America Ferrera) undergoes a makeover at the hands of her sister, Hilda (Ana Ortiz), and Hilda's black stylist to fit into the high-fashion world of *Mode*. The socially awkward Betty is transformed from a no-fashion geek into an ethnic urban fashion template. This scene is one of a few that locate Betty within a more classed and racialized ethnic space.

struction of middle-class whiteness. Her colors are not as garish, and her hair and makeup are tasteful. She wears fashionable shoes and more expensive clothes. Indeed, as the show's future became precarious in early 2009, one critic suggested that Betty's quick class transformation into middle-class femininity has made the show less funny.⁷⁴

Before the third season, what queered Betty's presentation of panethnic Latinidad was her in-between status—not quite Latina but never quite white, never particular yet always universal. For example, in the episode "Queens for a Day" (originally aired October 12, 2006), Betty, with the help of Hilda's black stylist, submits to her sister's beauty rituals. Her transformation into Latinidad during this episode is queerly exaggerated (see figure 4.2). She gets artificial nails in brightly colored red, teases her hair into a high bouffant with big curls, and puts on an outfit that looks like something of a cross between a drag queen and a ghetto-fabulous home girl. Throughout the scene, salsa, Latin pop, and reggaetón play in the background, reaffirming Betty's entry into an over-the-top rendition of working-class urban Latinidad.

Foregrounding Betty's drag-like performance of Latinidad is the episode's juxtaposed scene featuring Wilhelmina Slater's tony salon visit, where Wilhelmina (Vanessa Williams) subjects herself to an upper-class regimen grounded in white beauty practices and upper-class notions of taste. At the end of the episode, Betty disavows her sister's outlandish working-class performance of Latinidad as well as expectations by her boss to perform upper-class whiteness. She safely returns to her campy but undefinable style. Black Wilhelmina can improve her symbolic capital by transcending her blackness, but Betty neither fits into her sister's ethnic working-class world nor the elite white world of the high-fashion magazine she works for. Reminiscent of drag queen performances, Betty's style, beauty, and identity remain always in between—outside the beauty and class practices of urban Latinas and the beauty and taste standards of a fashion world grounded in white heteronormative privilege. Her rejection of both brown and white beauty practices ruptures the commodification of Latinidad and emphasizes her queer location. One of the consequences of Betty's third-season modification of her outrageous drag aesthetic is her move away from what some audiences considered the compelling queer outsider theme.

Queering Latina Motherhood

With its global distribution in more than 130 countries through Disney-ABC International, *Ugly Betty* depicts a loving, functional panethnic

Latina/o family that worldwide audiences can relate to regardless of their ethnic, racial, or national identity. Additionally, the show's representation of motherhood and family also contributes to the queer symbolic rupturing of mediated Latinidad. Representations of the Suarez family are unlike that of other Latina/o families seen on television and film. The young career-minded Betty performs a campy working-class panethnic Latina, and the sexualized Latina Hilda fiercely protects her Broadway-loving, fashion-diva son, Justin (Mark Indelicato). The sexually ambiguous Justin does not act or behave like the stereotypical hyper-masculine Latino, and neither does the heterosexual Ignacio, the enlightened Latino patriarch who loves to cook for and nurture his family. In his book *Next of Kin*, Richard Rodríguez calls for a reimagining of popular conceptions of the Latina/o family away from the patriarchal, heteronormative kinship system that defines its representation in the media.⁷⁵ Rodríguez suggests that queer aesthetics contribute to a rearticulation of media depictions of the Latina/o family while still maintaining its social, cultural, and political importance. Thus, as a show created, produced, and written by openly gay Horta and queer-friendly Hayek, perhaps the most radical element of *Ugly Betty* is its queering of Latina/o familial heteronormativity through its production of Latina motherhood and young Latino masculinity.

One queer reading of Hilda is that she's a self-referential campy reinvention of dominant mainstream media stereotypes, in particular that of the Latina spitfire and self-sacrificing Latina mother. Hilda's comedic, sometimes tragic performance of Latina motherhood, femininity, and sexuality and unequivocal acceptance of her non-normative son symbolically rupture the dominant tropes of the hot-headed Latina spitfire and the self-sacrificing Latina mother in a patriarchal Latina/o family. The show's producers generally avoid dressing Betty in tight-fitting, physically revealing, tropically colored clothing, but Hilda consistently wears those very clothes. She is Jennifer Lopez on a budget. Hilda celebrates her body and sexuality and is rarely depicted without exposed cleavage, tight-fitting pants, red lipstick, long, painted nails, and high-heeled shoes. Hilda almost marries her son's father and carries on an affair with a married man. She unconditionally celebrates her body and sexuality and strives to meet her emotional need for love. Yet Hilda is also the unconditionally loving mother who places the needs of her sexually ambiguous son at the center of her life. She regularly encourages her son's love of fashion, acting, theater, and potentially homosocial friendships with other boys. When his biological father, Santos, disciplines Justin for not being masculine enough, Hilda staunchly comes to Justin's defense.

After the boys at his school make fun of him for asking another boy to a Broadway musical—with tickets his mother purchased as a gift—it is Hilda who once again picks up the pieces without judging the possible homosocial aspects of the relationship. As one blogger commented, Hilda is the ideal queer-friendly mother:

When she finally coaxes the truth out of Justin, we are treated to one of the most touching and heartfelt scenes between mother and gay son since—well since Mark and his mom (as played by Patti Lupone) reunited. Hilda tells Justin that he's perfect just the way he is and anyone who doesn't think so is an idiot. I know, I know, every mom worth her mettle has tried this line on us—but somehow Hilda really makes Justin and us believe it.⁷⁶

This blog, similar to other journalistic and audience writings, assumes Justin is gay, even though the show's producers have purposefully left it queerly ambiguous.⁷⁷ Hilda performs a construction of Latina motherhood not readily visible in U.S. mainstream media. She symbolically ruptures dominant constructions of Latinidad through her complex representation of Latina motherhood and acceptance of her non-heteronormative family. She is the *nueve* Latina mother.

The show's engagement with queer camp, sexually queer characters, and queer-themed story lines together symbolically rupture the media's homogenous commodification of Latinidad. *Ugly Betty* features an openly gay male character (Marc/Michael Urié), one male-to-female transgender character (Alexis/Rebecca Romijn), and throughout its first three seasons has aired several explicitly gay-themed story lines ("I'm Coming Out," originally aired February 1, 2007, and "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," originally aired March 22, 2007, among others). Furthermore, in another public blurring of actors and characters, many of the show's cast members, such as Vanessa Williams, Ana Ortiz, and Becki Newton, are actively involved in supporting equal rights for the GLBT community.⁷⁸ Discussing the program as it relates to the GLBT community in *Out* magazine, Ferrera argues that people who are intolerant "miss out on the truly beautiful because they can't see through the stereotypes they live their lives by. Betty really proves that; if you don't love Betty, *you're* the asshole."⁷⁹ GLBT audiences are among the show's most ardent fans.⁸⁰ On fan Web sites, gay participants celebrate the show and its queer-friendly ideology of social acceptance and the American dream. For instance, on the ABC discussion board, one participant who identified as a gay man responded to an anti-gay posting about the show by arguing:

Ugly Betty is the best written television show since *Designing Women* and is meant to be fun . . . nothing more. It is well acted, unbelievably well written and adored by millions worldwide. After Will and Grace, I never dreamed that such a wonderful portrayal of gay characters would make its way back to primetime television.⁸¹

The program's socially conscious, intelligent sense of humor and sensitive portrayal of GLBT characters present a moment of symbolic rupture by troubling the generic conventions of ethnic and racial minority programming and dominant signifiers of Latinidad and Latina families as heteronormative.

Recuperating the American Dream

Textual readings, media responses, and audience writings about the show affirm the ideological success of its Latina Cinderella theme even as the show's queer aspects threaten to disturb popular understandings of Latinidad, Latina femininity, and Latina domesticity. However, in the end, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, race, class, and beauty do not matter in the search for the "American dream." Despite her more racialized performances of ethnic-racial identity, Hilda remains as committed as Betty to achieving the American dream on her terms. In his 2007 Golden Globe acceptance speech for best comedy, Horta spoke of the relationship between his immigrant background and the program's message: "This show is a testament to the American dream. And that the American dream is alive and well and within the reach of anyone in the world who wants it."⁸² The universal themes of unconditional acceptance and hard-won success provide a shared space for audiences across different backgrounds.

Despite the characters' development throughout the first three seasons, the liberal ideology of the show has remained constant and dominant. In the third season, when Betty learns that she was selected for a premier editing program because she is Latina, she withdraws from the program ("When Betty Met YETI," originally aired November 20, 2008). Encapsulating the show's ideological message, Betty decides she will only participate if she earns entry based on her merit, not her ethnic identity. Ethnic and racial identities are ideologically policed in the service of attaining the American dream through skill, merit and perseverance. Likewise, Betty's third-season decision to move back with her family—thereby once again occupying the more ethnically marked role of the family's Latina matriarch—has met with a strong backlash from audiences ("Sisters on the Verge of a Nervous Break-

down,” originally aired January 22, 2009). An entire thread on the ABC discussion board was devoted to complaints about Betty’s seemingly backward mobility in the episode:

Her family just does not GET Betty—her sister Hilda is whiny and selfish—and should have understood why Betty had to miss her opening party!!! Betty helped enough with her input and gift bags—she even sent her friend Christina to help! The fact that her father had a heart attack was NOT her fault—her being there wouldn’t have helped—or prevented it!!

AND—did she quit the Mentor program? What is going on? surprised
AND—she’s working at MODE for goodness sake—when is she going to get a makeover? Can’t she tell her clothes don’t match? Although lately they are at least a better quality of clashing colors and patterns!!!¹⁸

Such responses illustrate the careful negotiations the show’s producers must make between producing a safe, familiar, and consumable representation of Latinidad and maintaining the ethnoracial neutrality of the show’s liberal logic. Audiences are contesting Betty’s return to more panethnic story lines after a shift toward ethnoracial universality, which ultimately may be contributing to the show’s plummeting ratings.

The contradictions surrounding the production and reception of Latina lives in *Ugly Betty* demonstrate the complicated process of symbolic colonization in the media. On the one hand, the show symbolically ruptures pre-existing media representations of Latina/o lives through its queerness and sensitive portrayal of Latina loss, grief, and motherhood. On the other hand, much like *The Cosby Show*, it depends on the assimilation of ethnicity and race and the commodifiable nature of ethnic ambiguity for its global success. Foregrounding the liberal ideology of the American dream ultimately demands the safe containment of the potentially threatening growth of ethnic and racial difference, in this case Latinidad. U.S. Latina/o identity might not be understandable to audiences in Australia or England, but a story about a working-class family trying to make it in the big city translates across the world.

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