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## What Does Race Have to Do With *Ugly Betty*?

### An Analysis of Privilege and Postracial(?) Representations on a Television Sitcom

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The term “postracial” has been utilized in increasing amounts in the media to denote some people’s perceptions that the election of Barack Obama marks a new era in our society—one in which race no longer matters. This notion, while perhaps well-meaning, contradicts the very ways our society is structured. Race is an organizing principle (Henry 1995) in institutions such as government, schools, and popular culture. We cannot think or even act without racial categories becoming prominent. . . .

One place where racial discourse is especially powerful is within the institution of popular culture. We must continually critique and examine representations of racialized bodies, especially those bodies already marginalized within the system of racial hierarchies. In the spirit of continuing the examination of racial discourse, this chapter examines ABC’s television comedy *Ugly Betty*, in particular one episode that explores race-based affirmative action decisions and quotas (“When Betty Met YETI”). This episode of *Ugly Betty* aired two weeks after the 2008 election of Barack Obama. . . .

#### *Ugly Betty*, Privilege, and Affirmative Action

Betty Suarez, the fashion-challenged heroine of ABC’s sitcom *Ugly Betty*, works as an assistant to the editor of *Mode*, a high-fashion magazine. Part of her job entails meeting the multiple personal and professional needs of her boss, Daniel Meade, an irresponsible sex addict.

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Betty was hired by Daniel's father, Mr. Meade, precisely because Mr. Meade realized Daniel would not be attracted to a brown-skinned girl wearing braces and glasses. *Mode Magazine* is the context in which the series comedically explores issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The show offers lessons about making it in a competitive environment where beauty is everything and it is no secret that "beauty" is defined as "white, thin, upper-class, straight femininity"—a narrow conception of beauty. Those characters, including Betty, who fall outside of the definition of beauty learn to utilize other means to negotiate the environment. While the show does try to satirize stereotypes of race, gender, class, and sexuality, it nonetheless contributes to the reinscription of some stereotypes. Of course, as Stephen Neale and Frank Krutnik (1990, 93) suggest, "It is hardly surprising that comedy often perpetuates prejudice, or draws uncritically on racist and sexist stereotypes, since they provide a ready-made set of images of deviation from social and cultural norms." In addition, utilizing comedy to explore complex issues allows for the topics to be taken less seriously.

The regular characters of the show include Betty Suarez (played by America Ferrera), a twenty-two-year-old Mexican girl who works as an assistant to the editor, Daniel Meade (Eric Mabius). Other assistants include Marc (Michael Urie), who is white, gay, and knowledgeable about high fashion; and Amanda (Becki Newton), who is a blonde-haired, white, very thin woman who has sex with Daniel. . . .

Betty and Marc are both assistants: Betty works directly for Daniel while Marc works directly for Wilhelmina. Both their jobs include completing rather personal tasks for their bosses that would not seem part of their job descriptions. For example, Betty had to track down a watch Daniel left at a woman's house. He, however, could not remember which woman he slept with the night he left the watch. Betty had to send flowers and then make personal visits to seven women's apartments to retrieve the watch. Marc, on

the other hand, must flatter Wilhelmina on her beauty, brains, and accomplishments. He also injects her with botox, a chemical to help her retain a "youthful" appearance. Both Betty and Marc understand how they are used and not appreciated and, thus, have dreams of being much more than mere assistants and strive to be editors.

In the third season, Betty and Marc both apply to YETI (Young Editors' Training Institute). The program is highly competitive and accepts one assistant per magazine for training and apprenticeship as editor. As part of the interview, each applicant must create and market a magazine. Applicants must also be sponsored by an "insider" to the business. Marc worked on his magazine presentation for three months and created a complete magazine. He also chose celebrity sponsors who happened to know one of the judges. Betty only found out about the program forty-eight hours before the interview, so she rushed to put a magazine presentation together. She also asked Daniel to sponsor her, and although he said yes, he never finished her letter of recommendation.

As viewers, we see Betty's interview. She is her usual self—not very confident but charming nonetheless. In fact, one of the judges, a caramel-complexioned woman (her race is not evident but she appears white or Latina, based on hair and skin color), tries to give Betty personal encouragement by smiling and nodding during her presentation. Betty's idea, a magazine about women who are intelligent, beautiful, and independent, seemed to be liked by the judges. We are not, as viewers, privy to Marc's presentation. We do know that Marc shows up with a "team" and his sponsors, and we are led to believe he also completed a very good interview. It is Betty, however, who is accepted into the program. Marc is denied entry because he and Betty both work at the same magazine and YETI only accepts one intern per magazine.

Betty walks over to apologize to Marc when she finds out she was accepted and he was not. Marc, acting bitter about his loss, tells Betty his presentation was one

thousand times better than hers. Betty says to him, “Maybe they just liked my concept better . . . who knows why they picked me?” Marc laughs and says, “Yeah, OK. Whatever.” Betty suggests that perhaps she “wanted it” more than he did and, therefore, she was offered the internship. It is in this way Betty relies on the ideology of meritocracy as she believes that she wanted it more and, therefore, worked harder for it. She understands that she and Marc were evaluated as individuals and her presentation obviously conveyed more passion than Marc’s. Marc does not believe this and implies (via tone of voice and a knowing look) that he knows the “real” reasons she was picked and he was not. Betty asks him why he thinks they picked her over him. Marc refuses to tell her, so Betty continues to ask him. Finally he says, “Do you really think that what you did in two days is better than what I spent three months working on? Are you really gonna make me say it?” Betty incredulously asks, “Say what?” Marc fires at her, “You help them meet their quota.” Betty looks shocked and says, “What are you talking about?” Marc yells, “I mean they picked you, Betty Suarez of Queens, because you are Latina.” Betty pulls back, shaking her head no. Marc continues, “Because you are a token ethnic girl.” Betty gets upset and says “What? They picked me . . . that doesn’t even make sense. Wow, Marc you have said a lot of ugly things to me in the past but that is by far and away the ugliest.” Marc refuses to back down from his position and says, “Well, I’m sorry Betty. It may be ugly, but it’s the truth.” At this moment, we have no idea how Marc has even acquired this knowledge or if it is just his assumption. But the anger the issue raises between them is palpable.

Marc does not utilize the term “affirmative action.” Instead, he refers to quotas, a word indelibly linked in popular discourse with race-based affirmative action policies. Affirmative action became policy in the 1960s under President Johnson. The policy was initially launched to help improve the employment and educational access of

“minorities,” including people of color, and white women. Affirmative action now has a long history of contestation by whites and has been charged with creating “reverse discrimination.” At issue is the notion of whiteness as property and the questions surrounding who owns it, who has access to it, and who fights to protect it. Claims about reverse discrimination belie the very ways white privilege has been made invisible. Affirmative action is perceived as a threat to whiteness as property because it enables people of color access to education and employment previously reserved as the “property” of whites (Harris 1993). Although much of Marc’s disdain for a race-based affirmative action policy is communicated through his facial expressions, he is portrayed as angry and ready to claim the status of “victim.”

In the next scene, Betty’s family comes in to the office to celebrate her acceptance into YETI. They speak and sing, partially in Spanish and partially in English, while making lots of celebratory noise. Betty’s Mexicanness becomes hypervisible at this moment. Although she is regularly positioned as Other because of her looks and her status as a working-class Latina from Queens, she has never before apologized for her identity and, in fact, seems oblivious that her status within race, class, and beauty hierarchies could even affect her. Betty, up until this point, has been the poster child for the belief in meritocracy: that as long she works hard enough, she will achieve. The text generally seems to support this notion as well. Although Betty faces obstacles related to her looks, class, and race, she always manages to overcome. As the loveable heroine, Betty always finds a way to get the job done without ever claiming she was discriminated against or without any recognition that hierarchies exist in the fashion and business worlds.

In this episode, however, Betty seems embarrassed, as white coworkers look at her and her family in disgust. Betty seems to recognize the ways her family has been positioned due to racialized hierarchies.

The usually quiet office had been interrupted with difference (loud colors and Spanish words/songs). Betty pulls her father and sister into a separate room and explains what happened. She says she was nothing more than a quota to YETI. She says, "Well, I called and they didn't exactly deny it." Her sister says, "Who cares *why* you got in? You got in. Look, you got to take every advantage you can in this life." Hilda shares with Betty that when she goes to the butcher shop, "I put on my tightest tank top and say thank you to the pointer sisters" (she points to her breasts); she says that is what gets her to the front of the line and she does not care if it is unfair to other people.

Ignacio, Betty's father, also helps lift her spirits. He starts to remind her of the struggles he and her mother faced as immigrants to the country. Hilda complains while rolling her eyes, "Oh, here goes the young immigrant story." Although Betty seems equally annoyed about the story, she bows her head and sits. Her father tells her, "If being Mexican helped this time, take it." Betty replies, "No, Papi. I wanted to be accepted because I earned it." He touches her head and says, "You did."

The scene ends with that tender moment, but we are left wondering what Ignacio meant. In what ways did Ignacio believe Betty earned it? As viewers we are left to weigh the evidence. Marc had spent three months on his magazine to Betty's one night. Marc had two important sponsors and a slight advantage with nepotism (although not directly related to each other, Marc and his sponsors share the same race and sexual orientation). Betty's sponsor did not even submit a letter of reference for her. Marc had worked as an assistant for four years to Betty's two years. Marc had a team who helped him prepare while Betty only had herself. Did Ignacio really believe that Betty earned the acceptance into the program of her own accord?

In this episode, as in many affirmative action debates, a race-based affirmative

action decision is portrayed as being made without regard to qualifications and talent. . . . A binary has clearly been created between talent and race. Perhaps Betty's talent was similar to Marc's, but we do not know this. We only know that Marc assumes Betty was given the opportunity because she satisfied a quota, and that when Betty called YETI to ask if this was true, "They didn't exactly deny it." How do we, as viewers, make sense of this?

In the next relevant scene, Betty walks up to Marc, hands him an envelope, and says, "You're in. You were right. Your presentation was better than mine. I dropped out and you're in." Marc responds in disbelief, "Are you crazy? I have been discriminated against my whole life. If I was given an advantage like you I would take it and run with it." Betty does not buy Marc's claims of oppression, and she replies, "Marc, you are a gay man in the fashion industry. You have plenty of advantages." Marc says to her, "That gets me nothing." Of course, in the guise of comedy, it is then that a stereotypical gay man comes up to Marc and hands him backstage Madonna tickets. Recognizing the irony of this, Marc tilts his head and clarifies that it is *outside of the fashion world* he gets nothing. Betty tells him, "Marc, at the end of the day you deserved it more." Marc pauses, and Betty tells him to take it before she changes her mind. He takes it.

This exchange does not force Marc to examine his white privilege. Marc, as a white gay man working in the fashion world, is relationally privileged and oppressed. Gay men are relatively prominent in the fashion world (see Lewis [2007] for a recent critique of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a television show where five gay men are positioned as fashion and lifestyle experts). Betty tries to make Marc's gay privilege within the realm of *Mode* visible, but he gets defensive and will not truly recognize it. Claiming a victim stance, Marc shrugs off the example of the concert ticket as an individual privilege. Betty sees the irony of this, but Marc silences the rest of the

conversation by claiming that he is oppressed as a gay man outside of the fashion world. . . .

As in all lighthearted comedies, by the end of the episode, all is well. Daniel makes a call and tells YETI that Betty also worked at *Players Magazine* that year. She and Marc, therefore, could be listed as assistants at separate magazines. Daniel also provides Betty a copy of the recommendation letter he sent to YETI. It is a six-page document, and we are led to believe that Daniel, although he often falls through on promises to Betty, genuinely cares for her despite his many faults. This move on his part—making one phone call to solve Betty's current problem—constructs him as the "great white hope" (see Giroux [1993] for a discussion of the role of whites as saviors in the lives of young adults of color). He becomes Betty's savior by swooping down at the last minute and exercising his power and privilege.

While Betty certainly gains from this move, the real issues of race-based affirmative action and quotas are never fully explored. Marc's resentment is still there. Betty's doubts about her abilities in relation to Marc's still remain. And viewers are left with reified notions of difference. . . .

Betty's refusal to accept the internship (once she realized being Mexican assisted her) reifies the notion that one must succeed on her or his own without anyone's assistance. What is ironic about the episode is that, while Betty believed morally and ethically that she wanted to be accepted into the program on her own merits, Marc's standpoint was different, although it was not articulated as such. Marc brought a "team" with him, including his two famous sponsors (thereby promoting nepotism) and friends/coworkers who helped him with his presentation. While Betty sat at her kitchen table alone and constructed her presentation, it is presumed Marc had his team help him construct his.

Yet Marc feels powerless against race-based affirmative action policies. He believes he was the better candidate and that

Betty, the "Latina from Queens," did not fully earn her acceptance into the internship. As Applebaum (2005) articulates,

The ability to deny the presence and power of current everyday racism and the undeserved benefits that some groups accrue at the expense of others, is premised on the ability to see oneself "as an individual" and not to see oneself "as white." To see oneself "as white" and to interrogate what that means would undermine the appeal of the innocent victim upon which arguments about reverse discrimination are based. (p. 286)

Based on this reading of *Ugly Betty* as a text about race, one can surmise that we, as a nation, are not postracial. On the contrary, race still structures our lives. . . . In lieu of ignoring race, we need, instead, to start examining the ways race, history, popular culture and the political economy continue to work in tangent to sustain racialized hierarchies.

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