

“Guido” Culture: The Destabilization of Italian-American Identity on *Jersey Shore*

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Italian-American leaders oppose MTV’s *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012) on the basis that the reality television series, which chronicles the lives of eight young Italian-American men and women housemates who self-identify as “Guidos” and “Guidettes,” promotes ethnic stereotyping. While the term “Guido” has long been considered an ethnic slur against urban working-class Italian Americans in the Northeastern United States, the generationally pejorative word has been embraced by many younger Americans of Italian heritage. Like the cast of *Jersey Shore*, they use it to recognize practitioners of Guido style who skillfully craft their identities in response to mass-media representations of Italian-American culture.¹ Nonetheless, numerous prominent Italian Americans worry that *Jersey Shore* might encourage viewers to conflate Italian Americans with the Guidos they see on television. Robert Allegrini, public relations director for the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF), which promotes Italian-American culture and heritage through educational youth programs, expressed concern that viewers might “make a direct connection between ‘[G]uido culture’ and Italian-American identity.”² In a letter to Philippe P. Dauman, the president and CEO of MTV Networks’ parent company Viacom, written on behalf of both the Italian American Legislative Caucus and the New Jersey Italian and Italian American Heritage Commission, New Jersey State Senator Joseph F. Vitale explains that “[t]he problem lies in the fact that, for the audiences that *Jersey Shore* is being marketed to, the overly-muscled, overly-tan caricatures of long-held ethnic stereotypes highlighted on the show may form the basis of ethnic generalizations that do a disservice to Italian Americans everywhere.”³ Viewers may feel encouraged to equate Italian Americans with Guido stereotypes because, as Santina A. Haemmerle, president of the world’s largest and longest-established Italian-American organization, the National Commission for Social Justice (CSJ) of the Order Sons of Italy in America, has noted, the series portrays Italian Americans in terms of Guido culture while ignoring the many historic achievements of the broader Italian-American community.⁴ Hence there have arisen concerns that *Jersey Shore* might compel viewers to reduce Italian-American identity to Guido and Guidette subculture tout court.

In order to illustrate the potentially discriminatory effects of the series, Italian-American advocates, like Andrè DiMino, then-president of UNICO National, the largest Italian-American service organization, have characterized the program as the latest in a long and regrettable

¹ Sociologist Donald Tricarico compares the appropriation of “Guido” by young Italian Americans to the use of the N-word by African Americans and the term “queer” by members of the radical gay community. Quoted in Caryn Brooks, “Italian Americans and the G Word: Embrace or Reject?” *Time U.S.*, December 12, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1947338,00.html>, accessed September 1, 2013.

² Robert, Allegrini, “Letter to Philippe Dauman,” November 24, 2009, https://www.niaf.org/public_policy/images/niaf_letter_viacom-jerseyshore11-09.pdf, accessed September 1, 2013.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Santina A. Haemmerle, “Letter to Judith McGrath,” November 13, 2009, <http://www.osia.org/documents/CSJPresidentReportandLetters2010.pdf>, accessed September 1, 2013.

history of media portrayals promoting stereotypes of Italian Americans.⁵ In a joint conference held at the Seaside Heights Community Center, in Seaside Heights, New Jersey, on January 30, 2010, for leaders of Italian-American groups and politicians from the state of New Jersey, entitled “the Summit on the Shore”—and abbreviated according to the letters of the Morse code distress signal SOS—, in which attendees discussed their reactions to the program and sought support in managing the possibly harmful effects of *Jersey Shore*, DiMino compared the depiction of Italian Americans in the series with the reductive representations featured on television programs like *Who’s the Boss*, *The Sopranos*, and, more recently, *Desperate Housewives*. Like these shows, he argued, *Jersey Shore* circulates stereotypes of Italian-American culture.

Nevertheless, what distinguishes the depiction of Italian-American identity on *Jersey Shore* and merits further consideration are the ways in which its stereotyping of Italian Americans may assume a didactic function and support the idea of a more fluid and dynamic Italian-American culture. *Jersey Shore* disrupts the notion of a unitary and stable Italian-American culture by illustrating that the Italian American identity of the cast is not fixed or established, but rather, resembling the late-capitalist youth identities discussed by Rattansi and Phoenix, “always in process, always in a relative state of formation.”⁶ As for all of these groups, any apparent closure regarding Guido identity is “provisional and conditional in a literal sense, that is conditioned by and within specific social contexts, for example, particular peer groups in specific locales.”⁷ In fact, the superficial presentation of Italian-American culture on the show never appears antithetical to an underlying Italian-American identity. On the contrary, *Jersey Shore* deploys reductive representations of Italian Americans in ways that denaturalize Italian-American culture and question the possibility of the existence of an authentic Italian-American identity in the first place. An investigation of the asserted rather than assigned qualities of Guido culture cannot account for the power that some Italian Americans invest in what they experience as primordial Italian-American ethnicity. However, given the public outcry against *Jersey Shore* by leaders of Italian-American organizations engaged in anti-defamation critiques, a circumstantialist approach is necessary to illustrate ways in which the program debunks essentialist assumptions of Guido culture.⁸ Drawing on theories of gender performance as well as Italian cultural and media studies, I argue that the portrayal of Italian-American culture on *Jersey Shore* may be read productively to destabilize the apparent fixity of Italian-American identity. I do not wish to suggest that the *Jersey Shore* cast dramatize their identities because they *are* Italian American. Rather, I contend that their performance of Guido identity is what enables the

⁵ Fred L. Gardaphé (*From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* [New York: Routledge, 2006], xii) dates the first protests of media co-optations of Italian American heritage to 1930. At that time, New York City’s Italian American mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, wrote a letter objecting to the representation of Italian Americans as mobsters in Mervyn LeRoy’s 1931 gangster film *Little Caesar*. The first organized protests against media depictions of Italian Americans by Italian-American associations began in the wake of Mario Puzo’s 1969 Mafia novel *The Godfather* and its cinematic adaptations.

⁶ Ali Rattansi and Ann Phoenix, “Rethinking Youth Identities: Modernist and Postmodernist Frameworks,” in *Youth, Citizenship and Social Change in a European Context*, eds. John Bynner, Lynne Chisholm, and Andy Furlong, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 129.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ For an exploration of changing academic and popular understandings of ethnic identities as fixed and/or fluid in terms of primordialist and circumstantialist paradigms, see Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2007), 41-74.

housemates, irrespective of heritage, to cast themselves as exemplars of Italian-American culture.⁹

Jersey Shore undermines the stability of Italian-American identity by conflating it with Guido and Guidette culture and defining the latter in terms of practices and attributes that are available for appropriation. According to cast member Michael “The Situation” Sorrentino, “Guido” refers to “a good-looking, smooth, well-dressed Italian;” Ronnie Ortiz-Magro defines the term as “a guy that always looks prettier than his girlfriend;” for Paul “DJ Pauly D” DelVecchio, it means “a lifestyle” built around “family, friends, tanning, gel;” Sammi “Sweetheart” Giancola uses the label “Guidette” to specify “somebody who knows how to club it up, takes really good care of themselves, has pretty hair, cakes on makeup, tan skin (*sic*), wears the hottest heels—pretty much, they know how to own it and rock it.”¹⁰ None of these traits are shown to occur naturally. DelVecchio achieves his tan with a tanning bed. Giancola explains the key to her “pretty hair” is never to leave home without her clip-in, hair-lengthening extensions. And Sorrentino offers a primer instructing viewers on ways the Guido look may be achieved. According to Sorrentino, “GTL,” short for gym, tan, and laundry, are the three practices that, as Vinny Guadagnino says, “make the Guidos.”¹¹ The words and actions of the housemates illustrate that their Italian-American subculture is the result of a collective representation that is not given in origin but rather the result of a dramatized ideal. Guidos, while not necessarily born, may nevertheless be made.

Like the performance of female identity, as explored by Joan Riviere in her seminal essay “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” the representation of Italian-American identity on *Jersey Shore* operates as a form of cultural masquerade. Riviere describes the way in which professionally successful women may wear womanliness as a mask in order to “avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men.”¹² After reflecting on the possibility of an essential femininity beyond the mask of womanliness (“The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’”), Riviere concludes that there is no such difference: “whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.”¹³ Her work suggests that femininity is open to appropriation, “a mask that may be worn or removed.”¹⁴ Riviere’s study led scholars to argue that if sex-role behavior can be achieved by the opposite sex, it may also be adopted—rather than inherited—by members of the same sex.¹⁵ The portrayal of Guido and Guidette culture on *Jersey Shore* suggests the similarly imitative and contingent nature of Italian-American identity.

Jersey Shore demonstrates that non-Italian Americans may masquerade as Guidos and Guidettes, which is surprising in light of previous studies on ethnic identity and Guido culture. Sociologists Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann explain that “[w]hen groups and

⁹ Beverley Skeggs and Helen Woods, *Reality Television: Performance, Audience, and Value* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2-3 and 9, suggest that performativity may be a useful concept for understanding the mediated self-performance through which all reality television participants, sometimes dubbed “person-characters,” engage their bodies, gestures, and language in order to produce themselves as dramatic representations.

¹⁰ “A New Family,” *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, December 3, 2009.

¹¹ “Boardwalk Blowups,” *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, January 7, 2010.

¹² Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 10, no. 3-4 (1929): 303.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 306.

¹⁴ Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” *Screen* 23, no. 3-4 (1982): 81.

¹⁵ See Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 103 and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 107.

circumstances construct an ethnic or racial identity, that identity is often claimed to have some set of primordial moorings—an anchor in blood ties, common provenance, or the physical links of race. [...] [E]thnicities tend to be rooted in the kinship metaphor, expressed through reference to common ancestry or origin.”¹⁶

Guido culture has traditionally been understood in terms of the Italian heritage of its exemplars. For Donald Tricarico, “Guido” designates “a youth subculture [that] is explicitly defined in terms of nationality background” and “distinguished [from other White youth subcultures] by the ethnic Italian ancestry of its actors or proponents.”¹⁷ Fred L. Gardaphé interprets the term as “the way a number of Americans of Italian descent have chosen to identify themselves as being Italian American.”¹⁸ However, of the Guidos and Guidettes on *Jersey Shore* neither Jenni “JWoww” Farley nor Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi claim Italian ancestry. Farley is of Spanish and Irish descent. Polizzi, whose birth parents are Chilean, is half Italian through adoption.

Confronted with the revelation that some of the most notorious housemates are not of Italian heritage, and therefore not naturally reflective of Italian Americans, Italian-American organizations have remained largely silent. Consequently, the anxiety of Italian-American groups surrounding the Italian-Americanness of the cast members does not appear entirely motivated by a desire to eradicate slanderous portrayals of Italian Americans. Representatives of the news media who have publically addressed the mixed ancestry of the housemates appear most surprised at the fact that non-Italian Americans could pass so convincingly as to be mistaken for Italian Americans. Correspondingly, their focus is on the extent to which viewers may feel they have been misled. Evann Gastaldo, who broke the story for web-native news site Newser.com, advises readers, “Get ready for your world to be rocked, because everything you thought you knew is wrong.”¹⁹ An equivalent report on the CNN Entertainment Blog compares learning that Farley and Polizzi are not Italian to having “just been told that the earth is not quite as round as previously thought.”²⁰ Farley’s revelations are unsettling, if not earth shattering, because they imply that being a Guido or Guidette does not depend on one’s heritage. It is rather, as she explains during an appearance on the Fox News program *The Strategy Room*, echoing DelVecchio’s remarks on *Jersey Shore*, a matter of “lifestyle.” Some Italian Americans may aspire to live as Guidos or Guidettes. However, Guidos and Guidettes are not necessarily Italian American. The dubious Italian heritage of cast members suggests that if non-Italian Americans can adopt seemingly Italian-American Guido and Guidette characteristics and behaviors, these characteristics may also be achieved—rather than inherited—by Italian Americans.

Jersey Shore exemplifies the construction of an Italian-American Guido when special guest and Italian-Canadian actor Michael Cera, who visits with the housemates while on a publicity tour to promote a new film, receives a Guido makeover. After discussing his Italian heritage and learning that Cera’s father was born in Sicily, the cast members decide it would be

¹⁶ Cornell and Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race*, 93.

¹⁷ Donald Tricarico, “Guido: Fashioning an Italian-American Youth Style,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 19, no. 1 (1991): 42.

¹⁸ Fred L. Gardaphé, “Dialogue and Debate, Not Denigration and Dismissal,” in *Guido: Italian/American Youth and Identity Politics*, eds. Letizia Airos and Ottorino Cappelli (New York: Bordighera Press, 2011), 46.

¹⁹ Evann Gastaldo, “Jersey Shore Guidettes Aren’t Italian,” *Newser.com*. February 17, 2010, <http://www.newser.com/story/81085/jersey-shore-Guidettes-arent-italian.html>, accessed September 1, 2013.

²⁰ CNN, “*Jersey Shore*’s J-WOWW: Snooki and I aren’t Italian,” *CNN Entertainment Blog*, February 17, 2010, <http://marquee.blogs.cnn.com/2010/02/17/jersey-shores-j-woww-snooki-and-i-arent-italian>, accessed September 1, 2013.

entertaining to give Cera a Guido identity. They teach Cera their signature dance move and sign of approval (the fist pump), use hair gel and a dryer to blow out his hairstyle, dress Cera in an undersized Ed Hardy-brand T-shirt and apply fake tanner to darken his pale complexion. After this exercise, DeVecchio proclaims, “Yo, we just turned this guy into a Guido!”²¹ The metamorphosis is complete after a hot-tub baptism. Cera joins the cast in a rooftop soaking pool where they christen him with a Guido nickname: “The Ceranation.” His transformation into a Guido confirms that, like the non-Italian-American housemates, Americans of Italian ancestry may similarly adopt their Guido identities.

Like Cera, a majority of the housemates claims Italian descent. As a result, *Jersey Shore* creates multiple instances for viewers to consider the implications of a constructed Italian-American identity when it is performed by heritage members of the Italian-American community. Whereas cast members Farley and Polizzi do not assert Italian ancestry, the enacting of Italian-Americanness by the other housemates seems uncanny given their Italian extraction. Like female stars who trade upon exaggerated representations of femininity, a practice that film and gender studies scholar Pamela Robertson refers to as “feminist camp,” Cera and the Italian American housemates impersonate the Italian Americans they already seem to be.²² Their depiction of Guido culture operates as an Italian-American equivalent to what theater and performance expert Rebecca Schneider has termed an “Irigarayan ‘double gesture’” in reference to feminist representations of womanliness as “paradoxically essentialist and constructivist at once.”²³ *Jersey Shore* enables an analogous exploration of Italian-American identity as “a discursive construct [in addition to] an embodied, historically located object.”²⁴ Resembling the gender parody or “double mimesis” that film and media studies scholar Mary Ann Doane describes in reference to women who flaunt femininity, the putting on of Italian-American identities on *Jersey Shore* subverts the idea that an essential Italian-American culture exists prior to its representation.²⁵ The camp portrayal of Italian-American culture on *Jersey Shore* reveals the absence of a stable Italian-American identity behind the Guido and Guidette masquerade.

The exteriority of the Guido and Guidette lifestyle depicted on *Jersey Shore* recalls attributes of what sociologist Herbert J. Gans, in his study of mid-twentieth-century working-class Italian Americans living in Boston’s West End, identified as “peer group society.”²⁶ Like performers who thrive in front of an audience, Gans argued, members of peer group societies are

²¹ “Michael Cera Gets a Guido Makeover,” *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, January 8, 2010.

²² Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 9.

²³ Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 36.

²⁴ Geraldine Harris, *Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 19.

²⁵ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: the Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 181.

²⁶ Responses to Gans’ study demonstrate that while there are traits that have (rightly or wrongly) come to be associated with Italian Americans, it is possible to identify with Italian-American culture regardless of personal ancestry. On this subject, see Thomas J. Ferraro, *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); the contemporary attraction of both Italian-American and non-Italian-American youth to Guido subculture may result from what Tricarico has described as the increasingly positive valuation of Italian heritage by Americans at large. Tricarico contends that the greater parity of third-generation Italian Americans with their core American peers weakened the basis for ethnic distinctions based on national origins (“In a New Light: Italian-American Ethnicity in the Mainstream,” in *The Ethnic Enigma: The Salience of Ethnicity for European-Origin Groups*, ed. Peter Kivisto [Philadelphia: Balch Institute Press, 1989], 24-46).

characterized by their desire for display.²⁷ The cast of *Jersey Shore* may be identified according to the traits of peer group societies in three important ways. First, like members of peer group societies who value appearance and accessories as extensions of themselves, the housemates are preoccupied with their image: Giancola will not be seen without her hair extensions; DelVecchio refuses to leave home without having first spent a minimum of twenty-five minutes to style his hair; and Ortiz-Magro preens and applies lip gloss throughout the series. Another element that characterizes peer group societies, according to Gans' definition, is the subordination of individual identities to that of the group. The group is perceived as an extension of the individual. Challenges to individuals are interpreted as threats to the collective. On *Jersey Shore*, when one housemate is attacked, others respond as though personally provoked. For instance, in the second episode of the first season, DelVecchio punches a stranger at a bar for having shoved Guadagnino. DelVecchio recalls the incident: "One of the clowns push[ed] Vinny, and I fucking snapped!"²⁸ In Season 4, Polizzi exacts similar retribution on behalf of Cortese. Polizzi recounts her reaction to a woman in a Florence bar who intentionally spilled her drink on Cortese as follows: "I'm just like: don't fuck with my bitch. If you fuck with Deena, I will cut you. [...] I need to stick up for my girl. So I jump in and I just go apeshit, you know? Like a squirrel monkey."²⁹ Polizzi avenges personal attacks against other Guidos and Guidettes instinctively, likening her response on Cortese's behalf to (what she imagines to be) the defensive practices of simian tribes.

Finally, Gans's work suggests, in peer group societies, an insult regarding the appearance of one group member is interpreted as a collective slight. When Polizzi is accused of being overweight, Farley initiates a fistfight in Polizzi's defense. Asked to rationalize what happened, Farley explains that the target of her attack "called Snookers fat, and that, like, triggered me."³⁰ The spontaneous and seemingly involuntary responses of DelVecchio, Polizzi, and Farley, who act on behalf of other Guidos and Guidettes as if they are defending themselves, demonstrates that, like members of other peer group societies, individual housemates on the show attribute their identities to the group as a whole.

The style in which *Jersey Shore* is filmed further implicates the cast in practices driven by a need for external validation. Many of the housemates reflect on their actions while speaking into a "confession cam." This standard trope of reality television is a camera located in a room that the housemates enter individually. There, they speak while gazing directly into the camera, creating the impression of a direct address to the viewing public. The cast members use their confessional appearances to recount their impressions of past events and express remorse for personal wrongdoings. As the name of the cinematic device suggests, use of the confession cam positions cast members as penitents seeking absolution and viewers, who are on the receiving end of their confessions, as judges authorized to assess and forgive the housemates' transgressions. The confessional sequences are a discursive sign that, like members of other peer group societies, the housemates depend on external factors for validation and a corresponding sense of personal identity.

The superficial representation of Italian-American culture appears intentionally choreographed by select members of the *Jersey Shore* cast. During the sixth episode of the fourth

²⁷ Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 163.

²⁸ "The Tanned Triangle," *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, December 3, 2009.

²⁹ "Fist Pump, Push-Ups, Chapstick," *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, September 8, 2011.

³⁰ "Just Another Day at the Shore," *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, December 31, 2009.

season, for example, Guadagnino and DelVecchio, who self-identify with Guido culture, adopt what they refer to as “ultimate-Guido” personas and call themselves “Louie” and “Joey.”³¹ Guadagnino and DelVecchio improvise their alter egos from a repertoire of Guido and mafioso characteristics. Whereas Guadagnino and DelVecchio practice GTL, Louie and Joey engage in FPC, which stands for fist pump, push-ups, and ChapStick. Wearing tracksuits and headbands, the iconic, standard-issue uniform of lower-ranking members of criminal organizations in their Hollywood manifestations, Guadagnino and DelVecchio acknowledge the historical portrayal of Italian Americans as mafiosi. Like the costumes that Gardaphé argues enable director Martin Scorsese to distinguish his Italian-American gangsters from the rest of society,³² Guadagnino and DelVecchio’s clothing demonstrates that dress is a similarly indispensable element for fashioning Guido identity.

Guadagnino and DelVecchio’s ironic autobiographical Guido satire reveals the knowing complicity of at least some participants in Guido culture who may be “active agents in the making and remaking of their [Guido] identities.”³³ While *Jersey Shore* depicts “ultimate Guidos,” for instance, it never represents “ultimate Guidettes.” Portraying ultimate Guidos enables men in the series to distance themselves from their Guido personas. In the absence of a hyperbolic Guidette equivalent, the women housemates appear more closely linked with the Guidette image and less autonomous with respect to the representation of Guido culture. Guadagnino and DelVecchio’s ultimate-Guido transformation suggests that, like their ultimate-Guido personas, at least male Guidos may adopt their original Guido identities.

Parodies of the housemates on other media outlets speak to the comprehensive fabrication of Guido culture in the series. Bobby Moynihan’s widely disseminated impression of Polizzi on the Weekend Update segment of *Saturday Night Live*, for instance, plays up Polizzi’s trademark tan and signature hairstyle, the “poof,” as well as her search for the perfect Guido “juice head” boyfriend. Moynihan’s appropriation of the most remarkable elements of Polizzi’s style and ongoing motivation highlights the manufactured quality of Polizzi’s Guidette persona. In another well-known representation of the cast members, from the late-night comedy program *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, comedian Kimmel underscores the artificiality of Guido culture by setting guests Polizzi, DelVecchio, and Sorrentino in a staged scene from a Christmas pageant. The naturalistic desert backdrop contrasts with the faux tans and conspicuously muscled forms of the housemates, underscoring the artifice involved in their representation of Italian-American identity.

A final parody depends upon the ambivalent potential for signification coded in Sorrentino’s nickname. Sorrentino is known for compulsively exercising his abdominal muscles as part of his personal quest “to look like Rambo with his shirt off.” His toned midriff, which he refers to as “The Situation,” has become, largely at his own urging, a synecdoche for Sorrentino himself. In a popular YouTube cartoon in which Sorrentino makes a guest appearance on the show of CNN host and political analyst Wolf Blitzer, Sorrentino’s nickname confuses Blitzer, who remains uninitiated into the nicknaming practices popularized on *Jersey Shore*, i.e., the fact that receiving a Guido moniker may be the last step in assuming a Guido identity. Blitzer and

³¹ The term “Joey” is sometimes understood to be a second-generation synonym for Guido. See Tricarico, “Guidos on MTV: Tangled up in the Feedback Loop,” in *Guido: Italian/American Youth and Identity Politics*, eds. Letizia Airos and Ottorino Cappelli (New York: Bordighera Press, 2011), 109.

³² Gardaphé, “Dialogue and Debate,” 77.

³³ Cornell and Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race*, 87. On the use of satirical irony in ethnic autobiographies, see Michael M. J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 194-233.

Sorrentino talk past one another as Sorrentino speaks about himself while Blitzer believes he is participating in a conversation about his own news program, *The Situation Room*. The focus on Sorrentino's muscular figure highlights the fact that the defining feature of his Guido persona is an acquired characteristic, underscoring the connotative nature of traits that might otherwise seem inherent in Guido culture. Parodies of the housemates illustrate that what is necessary for the cast members of *Jersey Shore* to be recognizable as Guidos and Guidettes is a crude set of attributes that are not inborn traits of Italian Americans.

Numerous cinematic references on *Jersey Shore* demonstrate that the Guido identities of the housemates are predicated on exteriority. For instance, the cast members frequently fashion their Guido personas from filmic representations of Italian Americans as mafiosi. Like contemporary practitioners of "hip-wop," a style of (traditionally African American) rap music that has been appropriated by Italian Americans, the Guidos and Guidettes on the series forge their identities from the image of the Italian American gangster. Similar to the hip-wop artists studied by Joseph Sciorra, relying on the figure of the mafioso enables Guidos and Guidettes on *Jersey Shore* to develop and express an identity grounded in tropes that have come to be associated with Italian American culture.³⁴

Like Italian American movie gangsters, the housemates use the word "rat" to designate informers and other members of their community whom they perceive to betray the interests of the group.³⁵ On *Jersey Shore*, Sorrentino and DelVecchio agree that Guadagnino "talks about [Sorrentino] behind [his] back, like a rat."³⁶ Guadagnino's corresponding punishment is to have smelly cheese hidden under his bed by Sorrentino and DelVecchio because "rats eat cheese."³⁷ Sorrentino and DelVecchio also use the expression against Pivarnick, whom they call a "white rat" to draw attention to the fact that her pale skin betrays the Guido and Guidette identity of the tanning-obsessed housemates.³⁸ Polizzi redeploys the nickname to argue that Pivarnick does not belong among the other members of the cast. "You don't deserve to be here, Angelina. [. . .] You're a fucking white rat and you're fucking pale and you're nasty."³⁹ In refusing to engage in the tanning practice that characterizes the larger Guido community with which she identifies herself, Pivarnick fails to play her role in the housemates' collective enactment of Guido culture. The performance of *guidità* on *Jersey Shore* resembles displays of *bella figura* during the Italian ritual of the *passeggiata* or evening stroll in which successful cultural representation is "seen as an indicator of moral character. [...] Good performance is interpreted as a sign of integrity and bad performance is seen as an indicator of dishonesty or disrespect for the community."⁴⁰

³⁴ Joseph Sciorra, "The Mediascape of Hip-Wop: Alterity and Authenticity in Italian American Rap," in *Global Media, Culture, and Identity: Theory, Cases, and Approaches*, eds. Rohit Chopra and Radhika Gajjala (New York: Routledge, 2011), 33-51.

³⁵ The term is explicitly linked with Italian American mafiosi in cinematic works like Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Godfather: Part II* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount, 2005) in which the Godfather, Michael Corleone (Al Pacino), disowns and then disposes of older brother Fredo Corleone (John Cazale), who objects to being sent off to "take care of some Mickey Mouse nightclub," for thoughtlessly ratting out Michael's location to would-be hit men; and Martin Scorsese's 1990 film *Goodfellas* (Warner Bros.), in which veteran mafioso Jimmy Conway (Robert De Niro) advises newcomer Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) that one key to success as a wiseguy is "never [to] rat on your friends."

³⁶ "One Shot," *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, January 14, 2010.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "Goin' South," *Jersey Shore*, MTV Network, July 29, 2010.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Giovanna P. Del Negro, *The Passeggiata and Popular Culture in an Italian Town: Folklore and the Performance of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004), 61-62.

According to Polizzi, for whom aesthetic display seems tied to broader cultural values, Pivarnick's appearance reflects poorly on the entire *Shore* cast. Polizzi's comments also suggest gender divisions that may characterize Guido culture. Like Pivarnick, Guadagnino seldom appears to go tanning. However, he receives no negative attention from the housemates as a result. In this case, Guidettes seem to bear a greater responsibility with respect to the aesthetic performance of Guido identity. The detour through cinematic codes that identify Guadagnino and Pivarnick as traitors and betrayers of Guido and Guidette identity frames the housemates who would rectify their transgressions as characters from movies.

Once aligned with film personalities, housemates may react to a given set of circumstances in a manner befitting their cinematic doubles. Websites like jerseyshoreslang.com track the use of phrases the cast members borrow from movies. The site redefines the terminology according to its deployment in *Jersey Shore*. For instance, it categorizes the epithet "Stage 5 Clinger," which DelVecchio employs to describe a young woman who pursues him throughout most of the first season, as "a chick who, after hangin[g] out with her once and diggin[g] her, you keep running into on the boardwalk when you are macking on [(hitting on)] other chicks. She might even go so far as to make you a [T-]shirt to remember her by, and call your house repeatedly after she told you she wouldn't." The expression does not originate with DelVecchio, however. Rather, like many of the phrases the male cast members use to disparage the women they date, it can be traced to David Dobkin's 2005 movie *Wedding Crashers*. In this film, Vince Vaughn's character, Jeremy Grey, hopes to avoid Isla Fisher's sexually predatory character, Gloria Cleary, who is accused of having formed an especially strong bond with Grey as the result of her sexual inexperience. When he realizes Cleary is homing in on his location, Grey exclaims "I got to get outta here, pronto. I got a stage five clinger—stage five, virgin, clinger."⁴¹ After identifying with Grey, DelVecchio associates the woman pursuing him with Cleary. Like Grey, DelVecchio works to evade his Cleary-equivalent. The intertextuality of *Jersey Shore* suggests that the Guido and Guidette identities it depicts precede their representation on the series. The fact that the meaning of the texts and contexts that codify *Jersey Shore* is so often influenced by other works calls into question the idea that an underlying Italian-American identity can exist prior to representations in which the performance of Italian-American culture enacted by the cast of *Jersey Shore* seems always already expected.

In addition to the cinematic texts referenced in the series, many of the settings featured on *Jersey Shore* operate in a similarly discursive fashion to project an Italian-American identity onto the housemates. Like the urban Italian-American neighborhoods that feature prominently in hip-hop music videos and certify hip-hop performers as legitimate representatives of Italian-American culture,⁴² Italian-American geographic citations on *Jersey Shore* operate to ground Italian-American identity in specific locations. The series characterizes Seaside Heights, where a majority of the program takes place, as an Italian-American territory. Residential neighborhoods in Seaside Heights are shown to contain garage doors painted the colors of the Italian flag, and the establishing shots omit most businesses that do not bear nominal relationships to Italian-American culture. As a result, *Jersey Shore* codes Seaside Heights, and other New Jersey locations such as Toms River, Neptune, and Atlantic City, and by extension, the larger state of New Jersey, as Italian American. Living in New Jersey enables the Guido and Guidette housemates to negotiate their place in a regionalist subculture whose imperatives of authenticity

⁴¹ *Wedding Crashers*, dir. David Dobkin, New Line Cinema, 2006.

⁴² Sciorra, "The Mediascape of Hip-Wop," 41.

are tied to residence in a long-standing home of many members of the minority Italian-American community.

The mise-en-scène of their home in Seaside Heights also links the housemates with Italian-American identity. The residence is decorated with Italian-American icons, such as green, white, and red tricolor decals and posters featuring Italian-American movie-actor Al Pacino. As these examples suggest, settings on the show often signify Italian-American identity in relation to films with Italian-American themes, for instance when the housemates are seen aboard a yacht named the “Forgetabowdit,” a nautical play-on-words (the forward end of a boat is called a “bow”) based on a line frequently repeated by mafiosi in Mike Newell’s 1997 movie *Donnie Brasco*. In this example, an Italian-American text codes a setting in which the cast members, through association with the subject matter of the film, may be read as Italian American.

Not only does *Jersey Shore* provide viewers with examples that the location of the cast members—not the housemates themselves—is what often supplies their apparent Italian-American identities; it also demonstrates that the core definition of the cast members is threatened by suggestions that they are not from the state of New Jersey, which *Jersey Shore* represents as a central site of Italian-American culture. Although merely two of the original cast members, Sorrentino and Giancola, have lived most of their lives in New Jersey, almost all of the housemates react defensively to comments that link them with other settings. Throughout the first season, DelVecchio and Polizzi become angry with fellow bar patrons and strollers along the boardwalk who reproach the housemates by urging them to return to New York (DelVecchio is from Johnston, Rhode Island, but Polizzi was raised in Poughkeepsie, New York). When a heckler correctly identifies Ortiz-Magro, who is from the Bronx, as a native of New York (after first guessing that Ortiz-Magro is maybe from Manhattan or Brooklyn, he yells for him to “go home to Staten Island!”), Ortiz-Magro responds with a reflexive punch that lands him in jail for assault.⁴³

The housemates also use place-based labels as slurs against one another. The fact that few of the cast members grew up in New Jersey furnishes ammunition with which to disparage one another during disagreements. When the housemates learn that Pivarnick, who is from New York, will rejoin the cast for a second season after departing midway through Season 1, they ridicule her as “Staten Island Angelina.”⁴⁴ In retribution for her having called his on-again off-again girlfriend Giancola a bitch, Ortiz-Magro tells Polizzi “you’re a fucking loser from Poughkeepsie.”⁴⁵ Disambiguating the insult, Giancola adds: “You were fake as fuck.”⁴⁶ The cultural credibility of the cast members depends upon their location in spaces coded as Italian American.

Given the environmentally contingent nature of Guido and Guidette culture, departures from Italian-American territories threaten to undermine the Guido and Guidette identities of the cast. The second and fourth seasons of *Jersey Shore* take place in Miami, Florida, and Florence, Italy. The alternate locations enabled the cast to escape the cold Northeastern winters that corresponded with filming. During Season 2, an existentialist episode entitled “Not So Shore” witnesses the housemates’ grappling with a search for meaning in the face of boredom, personal uncertainty, and disorienting homesickness in Florida.

⁴³ “Boardwalk Blowups,” January 7, 2010.

⁴⁴ “Goin’ South,” July 29, 2010.

⁴⁵ “Back to the Shore,” *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, January 6, 2011.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

These feelings are compounded in Season 4, when the cast relocates to Florence and learns that many of the practices that constitute its Guido and Guidette Italian-American culture, in particular frequent gym exercise and tanning, are difficult to replicate in Italy and are often incompatible with Italian society. A self-diagnosed “tanorexic,” DelVecchio laments, “we’re losing our tan; we ain’t been to the gym.”⁴⁷ He calls these “Guido and Guidette problems,” and confesses, “I’m embarrassed to leave the house this pale.”⁴⁸ Cortese, concerned about maintaining her acrylic nails, a grooming practice not popular in Italy at this time, echoes the sentiment: “I have no nails on, we’re so pale, I’m all fucked up.”⁴⁹

Polizzi’s wellbeing is similarly compromised as the result of moving to Italy. In the ninth episode of the season, she not only regrets the inability to practice the attributes she identifies with Guido and Guidette culture, she also explains that if only she were able to replicate them, in particular visiting Karma, a club the cast frequents in Seaside Heights, then she might be able to cure the depression she is experiencing after a (temporary) breakup with her boyfriend Jionni LaValle. After LaValle leaves her in Florence, Polizzi says, “This isn’t me. I can’t be in Italy anymore. I need to get nails done (*sic*), and I need to shop, and get fucking Jersey attire, and I just need to go to Karma. I swear to God, if I went to Karma tonight, I would feel fine.”⁵⁰ In order to curb her depression, Polizzi puts on her “best Jersey outfit” and, with the help of DelVecchio, who has his Italian-flag-emblazoned DJ equipment with him in Italy, recreates club Karma in their Florence apartment. Rather than the return of her love object, what makes Polizzi feel like “herself” is the recreated landscape where the practices associated with Guido and Guidette culture are possible. To remedy Polizzi’s depression, it is necessary to remediate her displacement from New Jersey.

The double meaning of the title of the tenth episode of Season 4 symbolizes the location-contingent wellbeing of the entire cast. “Situation Problems,” as the episode is called, signifies both the loss of Sorrentino’s trademark abs, because the distance of his gym in Florence makes frequent workouts less feasible, and also the extent to which the Italian rather than Italian-American setting in which the housemates are located frustrates the maintenance of their Guido and Guidette lifestyles. The decadence that the cast members experience in Florida and Italy, a symptom of their departure from New Jersey, confirms that their Guido identities are the products of Italian-American environments.

The stereotyping of Italian Americans on *Jersey Shore* suggests that Italian-American culture is not necessarily the product of Italian Americans; it may be constructed through reference to texts and contexts that enable the cast to be coded and read as symbols of Italian-American identity. The fact that few of the housemates who call themselves Guidos and Guidettes claim full Italian heritage, coupled with on-show tutorials and transformations of Italian-Canadian actor Michael Cera and the Italian-American cast members into Guido and ultimate-Guido personalities, demonstrates that even those with Italian ancestry may nevertheless adopt, rather than inherit, their Guido attributes.

On *Jersey Shore*, Guido culture is the result of constant negotiations. It is the contingent product of continuing interactions between given representations of Italian Americans, as understood by members of the Italian-American community as well as cultural outsiders, and the actions of the Guido and Guidette housemates. Similar to some forms of Italian-American

⁴⁷ “Hurricane Situation,” *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, January 5, 2012.

⁴⁸ “Situation Problems,” *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, October 13, 2011.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ “Three Men and a Snooki,” *Jersey Shore*, MTV Networks, September 29, 2011.

performance art in relation to Italian-American culture, the staging of ultimate-Guido identity on *Jersey Shore* exposes the socially constructed nature of practices and attributes associated with Guido culture and offers grounds for questioning assumptions undergirding absolute notions of Italian-American identity.⁵¹

The masquerade of Guido culture by both non-Italian Americans and heritage members of the Italian-American community suggests that Italian-American identity is open to appropriation by actors with the savvy to emulate the stylistic and behavioral cues associated with Italian-American culture. The apparent Italian-Americanness of the Guido and Guidette housemates—precisely what is so troubling for Italian-American leaders about the series—is not based on essential traits. Instead, *Jersey Shore* demonstrates that, as with all peer-group societies, the Italian-American culture of the cast is predicated on exteriority. This is illustrated when the housemates depend upon such variables as cinematic codes and environmental factors to define their Italian-American identity.

Symbols of Italian-American culture, which operate as metonymic supports for the Italian-American identity of the housemates and enable viewers to identify the Guidos and Guidettes on the series with Italian-American ethnicity, point to the logical fallacy inherent in notions of a stable and contained Italian-American identity. Viewer (mis)recognition of the *Shore* cast as Italian American is shown to result from semiotic displacement onto de-centering symbols that are necessarily external to the cultural ethos that they signify. While the portrayal of Italian Americans as Guidos and Guidettes on *Jersey Shore* may encourage MTV viewers to understand Italian Americans in terms of reductive stereotypes, the construction of Guido culture on the series can also be useful for undermining stable definitions of Italian-American identity.

As the history of migration and outsider status become increasingly distant memories for a majority of Italian Americans, we may be nearing a point, as Ferraro suggests, when most Italian Americans make sense of their heritage primarily through media representations.⁵² It remains to be seen what role the conspicuous performance of Guido stereotypes in programs like *Jersey Shore* will play in ongoing formations of Italian-American culture.

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⁵¹ See Sciorra "A Lived History under Scrutiny: Italian American Performance Art," in *Teaching Italian American Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, eds. Edvidge Giunta and Kathleen Zamboni McCormick (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010), 182-99, for an overview of Italian-American performance art and its deconstruction of stereotyped portrayals of Italian Americans.

⁵² Ferraro, "Feeling Italian," 128 and 142.

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