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The “Guido” Situation: Constructing Ethnicity on MTV’s Jersey Shore

Abstract:

Jersey Shore is a program readily dismissed for its superficiality, but its cast’s troubling interpretation of Italian-American identity highlights the complicated relationship between race and ethnicity in the United States. While race is seen as grounded in the fixedness of blood and biology, ethnicity is marked through its unanchored signifiers, situated as both an artificial, performed concept and as definitive category of difference that facilitates the framing of tangible social inequalities. This concept is particularly salient to the two Jersey Shore’s cast members not of Italian origin, Nicole Polizzi and Jenny Farley; marking their self-professed “Guido” identity through discourse and body manipulation, their performance ultimately lapses into a sort of modern minstrel act. In this project I turn a critical lens on this popular program, demonstrating how the performance of “Guidoness” by the entire cast problematically reifies ethnicity as a space for both the agential framing of individual identity and the reinforcement of historically oppressive tropes.