

The Pitfalls of Positive Representation I Racquel Gates

“The Same Situation All Over Again”

In 2009, MTV premiered the reality show that would soar to popularity as everyone’s guilty pleasure. “Jersey Shore” chronicled the adventures of eight young Italian Americans as they lived and worked together during a summer in the east coast resort town of Seaside Heights, New Jersey. Even before the first episode aired, however, the network was plagued with complaints about the show’s “negative” depiction of Italian Americans. Italian civic organizations such as UNICO National complained that the show perpetuated crude stereotypes that were unacceptable in these more modern, enlightened times.

Of course, the controversy surrounding “Jersey Shore” is nothing new. Though criticism of the show is well-deserved, it is also inextricably tied to concepts of “correct” whiteness and racial performance. Traditionally, notions of “positive representation” have often reified white, heterosexual, middle-class norms of identity and behavior. In the early 1950s, the NAACP launched a successful protest against the television show “Amos ‘n’ Andy,” relying on the argument that it presented a stereotypical version of blackness that created false perceptions of what African Americans were really like. Because of these similarities between discourses of African American representation and the portrayal of Italian Americans on “Jersey Shore,” we should also note the similarities in the troubling ideologies that rest beneath both. This is not to oversimplify the matter by presuming that issues surrounding representations of African Americans and Italian Americans are identical, but rather, that they are both tied to the same notions of mainstream acceptability concerning appropriate racial performance.

One need only look at the plethora of media which question the cast members’ ethnic backgrounds and ridicule their physical appearance to see this process in operation. In a cross promotion for the 2009 film *Youth in Revolt*, a series of shorts involved actor Michael Cera (*Superbad*, *Juno*) hanging out with the “Jersey Shore” cast. The first begins with Cera revealing his own half-Sicilian background. He quickly rattles off a phrase in Italian, much to the confusion of the cast. Cera’s ability to recite a single phrase in Italian is meant to indicate that his brand of Italian identity is authentic in comparison to the spray-tanned, bouffant-coiffed, Ed Hardy-wearing attributes of the “Jersey Shore” cast. The fact that Cera has always functioned as a non-ethnic white in all of his films, however, leaves whiteness unchallenged as the norm, providing the base onto which his token, and ultimately preferable (by mainstream standards) Italianness is then mapped.

Even more telling is the way that cast member Snooki’s tanned skin comes under attack. In a video for the satirical website *Funny or Die*, Italian American actress Alyssa Milano scorns Snooki’s appearance by allowing herself to be made over “Jersey Shore” style.¹ The video makes a point to highlight the transformation of Milano’s white skin to the brown hue that Snooki prefers. In a world where makeup and lighting are regularly employed to make even Caucasian actresses and models appear as fair as possible, Snooki’s desire to look *darker* goes against every convention of what white femininity is supposed to look like. Put within this broader context of the normativity of whiteness, Milano’s parody of Snooki harkens back to the days when Jewish

¹ “Alyssa Milano’s Evolution: Jersey Shore.” *Funnyordie.com*, December 21, 2009.
<http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/4d2ebc8f52/alyssa-milano-s-evolution-jersey-shore>.

performers—their own grasp on categorical whiteness rather tenuous—“blackened up” to ridicule African Americans.

The desire to fix the “errant” racial performance of the “Jersey Shore” cast is particularly evident in the media fixation with giving them highly publicized makeovers, as seen in *In Touch Weekly* (January 18, 2010) and *Harper’s Bazaar* (May 2010).² Each photospread seems to rely on dual assumptions: first, that the cast must be taught the correct way to be white, and second, that the only thing funnier than a crass “guido” is a crass “guido” in haute couture sipping tea at the Ritz Carlton. The latter is eerily reminiscent of Reconstruction-era comics which portrayed African Americans as uncouth idiots dressed in ill-fitting finery.

Underneath such criticism is a kneejerk reaction to the portrayal of non-normative, ethnic whiteness, particularly on a mainstream network like MTV. Historically, Italians living in America have vacillated between categorization as either black or white, depending on the socio-historical moment and the circumstances. When UNICO president Andre DiMino released a public statement denouncing the show, saying “They [MTV] would not try and get away with the same tactics if it was a show full of young African American or Jewish kids,” he willfully ignored the history of racial representation on American television, and also separated Italian Americans from the set of racialized tropes that impact all marginalized groups. What DiMino’s comment reveals is a desire to continually solidify the whiteness of Italian Americans by ejecting those holdouts who refuse to conform to mainstream conventions. In spite of his claims otherwise, that troubling strategy is nothing new.

²“Jersey Shore Shows They’ve Got Class.” *Intouchweekly.com*, January 7, 2010.

http://www.intouchweekly.com/2010/01/jersey_shore_shows_theyve_got.php.

“Jersey Shore Makeover: Charm School.” *Harper’s Bazaar*, May 2010.

<http://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/fashion-articles/jersey-shore-makeover-pictures-0510>.