Contemporary Television's Construction of Sonic New Jersey

shannonkmooney

Blog post published February 3, 2020 in *Sounding Out!*
https://doi.org/10.59350/wbqad-2y008

Abstract

At the start of The Soprano's sixth season, in the wake of being accidentally shot by his dementia-suffering uncle, New Jersey mob boss Tony Soprano enters a coma-induced dreamstate in which he reimagines his life as a successful precision optics salesman.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Class, Cultural Studies, Identity



Recommended citation

shannonkmooney. (2020, February 3). Contemporary Television's Construction of Sonic New Jersey. *Sounding Out!*. https://doi.org/10.59350/wbqad-2y008

Copyright

Copyright © shannonkmooney 2020. Distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

At the start of *The Soprano*'s sixth season, in the wake of being accidentally shot by his dementia-suffering uncle, New Jersey mob boss Tony Soprano enters a coma-induced dreamstate in which he reimagines his life as a successful precision optics salesman. A show interested in Freudian psychology, *The Sopranos* is full of dream sequences, but this one stands out as the longest and most frustrating, as first-time viewers must watch as the hour-long plotline follows Tony's convoluted dream while his family waits in agony at his hospital bedside. Within the dream sequence, Tony awakens to find himself at a sales conference, where he has mistakenly taken someone else's briefcase, and he attempts to find its rightful owner. Despite the frustrating circumstances, Tony has lost his tough, mob boss demeanor: instead, he's professional, polite, and patient, qualities that the former Tony rarely exhibits throughout the show's six seasons.



Screenshot from YouTube video "The Sopranos – Join The Club /When It's Cold I'd Like to Die 720p"

But what immediately strikes me about this dream sequence is the sudden loss of Tony's thick Jersey accent. Gone is the fast-paced speech filled with dropped 'r's' and long 'a's' and 'o's'. Instead, Tony's way of speaking is relatively accentless, aligning with what is considered a neutral North American accent. By dreaming of himself as an upwardly mobile, white-collar worker, Tony has not only imagined a new career, he's also imagined a new way of speaking, one that lacks any clear markers of region, class, or ethnicity. This transformation ultimately tethers Tony's New Jersey accent to his identity as an Italian American mobster with working-class roots, and it reinforces the idea that speech is indicative of one's class. The dream sequence is one instance in which television constructs the New Jersey accent as signifying a certain brand of whiteness—not quite white trash, but perhaps one step above it, a form of whiteness lacking sophistication, riddled with ignorance and superficial wealth.

Here I examine contemporary television's construction and performance of the Jersey accent in order to understand what it confers about class status and ethnic identity. As others have argued, New Jersey dialects are actually quite eclectic, though contemporary television tends to represent the state's accent as defined by long vowels and quick, poorly articulated speech:



https://youtu.be/pOG7HYf81cw

I'm interested in how television shows such as *The Sopranos*, *Jersey Shore*, and *Real Housewives of New Jersey*, among others, construct the Jersey accent as a homogenous indicator of ethnicity and social class. Within these predominantly white shows, the Jersey accent is associated with whiteness, situating characters at a distance from dialects susceptible to scrutiny and violence, such as nonwhite immigrant accents or who embody what Nina Sun Eidsheim calls sonic blackness, but it also signifies that these characters do not come from respectable backgrounds or generational wealth.



Screenshot from Season 1 Episode 1 of MTV's Jersey Shore

New Jersey has served as a popular setting for contemporary television, and reality television in particular has capitalized on the state's materialistic and ostentatious reputation. As Alisha Gaines argues, reality television has a "full-blown crush" on the state, as its geography serves as "a stage for class and social passing, a late capital playground of ethnic representation." MTV's *Jersey Shore* is the most well-known reality TV show to emerge out of New Jersey. Although only a few of the show's main characters originate from the state, they all embrace a stereotypical Jersey aesthetic: the big hair, the tanned bodies, and yes, the accent. Like *The Sopranos*, *Jersey Shore*'s Italian American characters claim to have a complicated relationship to whiteness. The characters

attempt to reclaim the derogatory term "guido" (or "guidette," in the case of the show's female characters) and admit to not fully identifying as white: "I'm not white," the show's Nicole Polizzi (Snooki) says at one point. "I'm tan. That's what I am."

In Episode 7 of the show's first season, Snooki meets Keith, a man she's surprised to have hit it off with not only because he's not Italian, but also because "he talks like a cowboy." Yet Keith does not have a Southern accent, as one might expect, but instead speaks in a standard North American accent. Snooki's assertion that he speaks "like a cowboy," then, points to not only how accents are perceived (in the eye of the beholder), it also centers and normalizes the characters' Jersey accents and calls into question how American television audiences have been trained to experience and think about accented subjects.

Predictably, within New Jersey shows, accents and "improper" ways of speaking often become the butt of the joke. For instance, in *The Sopranos* episode "Cold Stones," Tony gifts his wife Carmela a Louis Vuitton wallet containing thirty grand in cash. "This is the real Louis *Vee-toon*," he assures her, butchering the pronunciation of the French designer's name. Tony may be able to afford the "real thing" (and then some), but his inability to sonically perform it gives him away: this is not a lifestyle he inherited or was born into; it does not come natural to him.

View this post on Instagram

A post shared by Every Outfit On The Sopranos (@sopranosstyle)

In a similar vein, Bravo produces blooper reels of the New Jersey Real Housewives mispronouncing common words (*skooers* instead of *skewers*, *lopter* instead of *lobster*, *bought* instead of *brought*, for instance).

Here, these characters' mispronunciations are intended to indicate their ignorance and lack of education, echoing the show's hints that their female characters have mob affiliations and primarily live off their husbands' money. Within the *Real Housewives of New Jersey* and other Jersey-based shows, commenting on the state's accent often functions as a way of implying that their characters are not to be taken too seriously, thereby influencing how audiences perceive this way of speaking beyond these shows (see, for instance, this Reddit thread).

As it pertains to whiteness and class, the privilege that the Jersey accent does or does not confer is difficult to unpack. Scholars such as Jennifer Stoever and Shilpa Davé have shown how nonwhite accents are subject to surveillance and violence in ways that white accents are not. Similarly, Christie Zwahlen argues in her *Sounding Out!* post "Look Who's Talking, Y'all" that "In contradistinction to 'foreign' sounding accents, Southern accents are a classic symbol of American cultural belonging, like apple pie for the ears." But what version of whiteness, and more specifically, Americannes, does the Jersey accent connote? While within the shows examined here, the accent is spoken primarily by characters belonging to immigrant groups that have been encompassed within the category of whiteness (often Italian and Jewish Americans), the legitimacy of these characters' social class and education level is often under scrutiny. These characters' interest in flashy outfits, gold jewelry, and French Chateau style decor (you know it when you see it) is represented as trashy and artificial, a performance of wealth rather than the actual embodiment of it.

In many ways, the "improperness" of the Jersey accent becomes another way of indicating that these characters are not highly educated and therefore their words, thoughts, and even their wealth, are deserving of suspicion. And a show like *The Sopranos*, in which most characters have organized crime affiliations, confirms that this suspicion is well-warranted. Indeed, this is not the whiteness or social status assumed to accompany standard English or American accents.

https://doi.org/10.59350/wbqad-2y008



"New Jersey" by Flickr user Doug Kerr, CC BY-SA 2.0

Unsurprisingly, these shows' centering of middle-class whiteness and its sonic registers ignores the disparity that exists across New Jersey's geographies. While the state is one of the nation's wealthiest, it's also home to poorer cities of color that continue to suffer from the effects of suburbanization and neoliberal urban development. For example, scholars such as Kevin Mumford and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas show how a city like Newark (a frequent setting on *The Sopranos*) has been heavily shaped by inequitable and volatile racial politics. And yet, the shows examined here eschew these socioeconomic and racial differences, erasing New Jersey's communities of color from the state's cultural discourses.

In an episode of HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*, set in Atlantic City during Prohibition, Irish immigrant Margaret Schroeder expresses her fear that her Irish accent makes her "sound like an immigrant," to which city treasurer Nucky Thompson responds, "But we're all immigrants, are we not?" While his response echoes the assimilationist myth of the U.S.-as-melting-pot, it hits on something precise about New Jersey: as the state with the third-largest immigrant population, the homogeneity of the region's accent is largely a construct. While contemporary television presents audiences with an all-encompassing Jersey accent, in actuality, the state's diversity makes it nearly impossible to pin down exactly what New Jersey "sounds like." Examining New Jersey's representations in popular television reveals how the accent has become one of the state's most prominent and recognizable features, and shows how these representations have the potential to reductively categorize an entire population.

—

Featured image: "Memorial Day Weekend" by Flickr user SurFeRGiRL30, CC-BY-2.0

—

Shannon Mooney is a PhD student in English and American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She received her M.A. in English from the University of Connecticut in 2018. Shannon studies contemporary multi-ethnic U.S. literature, television, and film, with a focus on

cultural geography and critical race theory. Her work examines how multi-ethnic writers and artists from New Jersey engage with the state's natural and industrial landscapes to make sense of their positions as political and historical subjects. Shannon is also the Creative Director of Paperbark Literary Magazine*, a publication rooted in sustainability and environmental justice.*

—

***REWIND! . . .***If you liked this post, you may also dig:

Teach Me How to Dougie Like A Mediocre White Man-Justin Burton

Speaking American-Leslie McMurtry

Vocal Gender and the Gendered Soundscape: At the Intersection of Gender Studies and Sound Studies — Christine Ehrick