

Homo Skin, Hetero Masks. A Representation of Italian Homonationalism.

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ABSTRACT

In this critical observation I will focus on images produced by Italian LGBTI community representing homosexuals as regulatory agents of the fatherland and active builder of the national community. From this stand point, these images are crucial to decline an Italian perspective on homonationalism (Puar, 2007). This normative project of national belonging for LGBTI subjects is implemented with many contradictory aspects in Italy, where homosexuals are subjected to a subordinate status of citizenship, without any measure of protection against homophobia nor any kind of civil rights. An approach grounded in cultural studies and visual studies, both as interdisciplinary fields of research and critical tools, will allow me to analyze these images as cultural practice and to point out their ideological implications. Within the theoretical framework provided by Jasbir Puar through the concept of homonationalism I will introduce these images as if they were masks, performative standards of identification/representation.

INTRODUCTION

"Finally, it seems to me that with the disciplines and normalization, the eighteenth century established a type of power that is not linked to ignorance but a power that can only function thanks to the formation of a knowledge that is both its effect and also a condition of its exercise." (Foucault, 2003, p. 52).

In conjunction with the 150th anniversary of the unification, in Italy we had to witness the burst of images produced by Italian LGBTI community celebrating the nation. Party flyers, posters and social campaigns represented the rising desire to come out as a fundamental part of the nation, through images. From our stand point, these images are crucial because they engender the slip from identity politics to national pride, from queer to national community. Moreover, in the development of these issues, we should consider that homosexuals in Italy are subjected to a subordinate status of citizenship, because they haven't gained any measure of protection against homophobia nor any kind of civil rights so far.

I have introduced my critical observation of these objects through Foucault's definition of normalization as a productive power and I would decline it in the field of visibility; in this vain I would develop the analysis of products out of the closet, as visible in the public sphere. The issue of visibility has always been at the heart of LGBTI claims. Hence, what is the relationship bounding the issue of visibility, with acceptance and nationalism in Italy?

I will try to address these questions by observing and analyzing three posters as products of homosexual popular culture. These posters display the construction process of a paradigm of acceptance and assimilation revolving around homosexuality and reveal how the complex and opposed production of a discourse of liberty for homosexuals is generating a normative project. In particular I will analyze a specific aspect of this normative trend focusing on images displaying a nationalist feeling that bounds the Italian LGBTI community. Through these images I will show the Italian perspective of what Jasbir Puar defines as homonationalism:

“At work in this dynamic is a form of sexual exceptionalism -the emergence of national homosexuality, what I term “homonationalism”- that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of American Empire. Further, this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects”(Puar, 2007, p. 2).

As introduced in the title, I am going to analyze these images using the metaphor “*White Masks and Black Skin*” by Franz Fanon¹ (Fanon, 1952)[□]. By the metaphor of the white mask I will deal with the performance of “normality”: grotesque exaggeration of patriotism, involvement in campaigns against immigrants, support of military interventions also by joining the army, cultural legitimation to modern crusade against Islam. In my analysis, I would like to employ this scheme of identification/representation in order to study what I would define Italian homosexual regime of visibility. This regime defines the borders of a visual field where power dynamics act manifestly. In this space, a canon is defined according to which what may be intelligible through the gaze must be acceptable, hence available to assimilation.

THE FATHERLAND MASK - HOMOSEXUALS AS DOMESTICATED AS AGENTS OF THE FATHERLAND

The first mask I am introducing is the “Fatherland mask”. Though this mask we can observe how the bonds of the nation are shaping the LGBTI community so that it fits with the national community.

“Civility: made in Italy”. This statement is used to advertise the last Italian Pride. *Civiltà* is the Italian word for both civility and civilization (Img.1). This word immediately brings us to classic colonial imagery. As we have always been told studying history, free and civilized people traveled to distant horizons to bring civilization: religion, progress and democracy. The campaign “*civiltà prodotto tipico italiano*” was created in 2010 to give great importance to the issue of identity, and of national identity above all. Because of its nationalist content, these

¹ According to Fanon, identity ossifies as the stereotype that the White produce for the Black and that the latter perform in order to exist. Fanon's theory implies, in other words, that there is no possible recognition by any means other than the imitation of the model. The only viable and recognized status is that of the colonized subject, and to achieve it, one has no choice but to perform the role of the colonized subject: the White man creates the Black, and the Black himself produces the Black. The colonized subject is produced as a stereotype that he crystallizes (by performing it) in order to gain his legitimacy (Fanon 1952).

posters have been circulated throughout the country in the day against homophobia, the 17th of May, advertising the next Euro pride in Rome. And what makes the widespread distribution of these posters so suitable is that the same day was the 150th anniversary of Italian unification. White, reassuring bodies, and food significantly contribute to the construction of Italian national pride. An invisible thread connects together Italian flag, Italian food, white middle class bodies, gays and lesbians, and the word civilization. De Vivo analyses the image above by suggesting that Parmesan cheese and sausages largely contribute to make it familiar and reassuring, thus creating a "domestication" of otherwise uncanny subjects (De Vivo 2011). I strongly emphasize the importance of food in the imaginary construction of Italian culture also because food has recently had a specific role within the so-called clash of civilizations, with several anti-kebab ordinances in some areas in northern Italy² (De Vivo & Dufour, 2012; De Vivo Barbara, 2011).

I defined this image the "fatherland mask" because I would particularly stress the re-appropriation of the symbols of the fatherland, in spite of this very fatherland always despising and discriminating against gays, lesbians and trans, considering them as subjects destabilizing the order of the national community. Because as elsewhere, also in Italy, homosexual movements were born in the late 60ies on the wake of the general rebellion against an old-white-male dominated society. "FUORI!" ("OUTSIDE!") was one of the first groups also publishing the first homosexual Italian review³. The name of this review shows the aim of the collective positioned outside the order of the family, capitalism, patriarchy, psychiatry and more in general of national community. On the contrary, the image we are analyzing clarifies the transition from outside to inside the boundaries of national community. Proud of their homosexuality, but even more of being Italian, homosexuals can be domesticated as regulatory agents of the fatherland, active builder of the national community, as opposed to subversive common enemies, those who do not belong to the fabric of the nation, such as immigrants and their children, rom, veiled women and all those who challenge our "democratic", "progressive" culture.

In this new setting of the national community the threat for terror feeds and normalizes patriotic feelings; this is the reason why those subjects usually excluded from national patriarchy, such as LGBTI people, could be turned into proud patriots. They become defenders of this new homonormative pedagogy grounded in a feeling of national belonging. In this perspective, the Italian experience suits the theoretical frame in which Jasbir Puar (2007) locates the issue of a homonormative nationalism, which she defines homonationalism. These circumstances could explain concretely relationships between new discourses on sexuality and nationalism mostly founded on terror and the attachment to the fatherland.

² Since 2010, in northern Italy, diverse mayors have issued ordinances managing the consumption of food in public. Italy has an important street food tradition, this is the reason why we have to consider this laws in the wider desire of policing the public for immigrants. These laws have the performative power of producing Arabic meals as a metaphor of an invasion came to corrupt the purity of our traditions.

³ The whole archive of the review is available on internet. <http://www.omofonie.it/fuori.htm>

I would link this picture and its aim with the Italian intervention in the Lybian civil war in 2011. It is quite paradoxical that just one day after the celebrations for Italian unity, Italy sent war contingents to Libya, a former Italian colony. Along with the narrative of "*Italiani Brava Gente*" (Italians, good people), our country has gone back to its colonial past. From a historical point of view it has been a useful experience in order to re-build national community during the years of Fascism. Nowadays, the new rhetoric of unification and the connection with the mission on the former colonial territories seems to suit the renewed demand of re-building national community because of latent social conflict due to the crisis. Proud of their homosexuality, but even more of being Italian, homosexuals can be domesticated as regulatory agents of the fatherland, active builder of the national community, as opposed to subversive common enemies, those who do not belong to the fabric of the nation, such as immigrants and their children, rom, veiled women and all those who challenge our "inclusive", "progressive" national culture.



Img. 1 "Civility: made in Italy". Proded by Arcigay 2010

THE WITHE MASK – THE ASCENDANCY OF WHITENESS

The next poster I am going to discuss allows me to introduce the racial angle of this analysis on homonationalism in Italy. From this perspective I would define the next "hetero mask" as a "white mask".

Two members of the Democratic Party in the Parliament, Jean-Léonard Touadi e Anna Paola Concia are the protagonists of a new campaign with social intents. This social campaign was produced by Arci⁴ in 2009 with the aim of fighting the spread of racism and

⁴ It is a national network of associations promoting campaigns and activities with social intents. Born in 1957 and

homophobia in Italy (img.2). I insert the poster in the wider strategy of implementing a nationalist but also white and reassuring representation for the Italian LGBTI community.

Two bares bodies, two opposite bodies of opposite colors, black and white. Their different complexions contrast and emphasize each other in the picture: the black skinned body makes the female body paler, the white skinned body makes the male body darker. The written sentence brings to the realm of visibility which eyes cannot see, in order to give the right collocation to those bodies: "*ci chiami sporco negro e lesbica schifosa*" ("you call *us* dirty nigger and icky dyke"). Then it adds: "*ma ti offendi se ti chiamano italiano Mafioso*" ("but you feel offended if they call *you* Mafioso Italian").

I chose this picture because like the previous one, the center of all the meanings deals with the topic of nationalism and it clearly shows the slip from pride to national chauvinism: "nigger" and "dyke" are the two terms of the pride linked and opposed to the Italian pride by the contrast of "us/you". This picture is a sort of mirror of a society building monolithic identities even when it makes an effort against sexism and racism: the skin, as a border, separates Touadi, representative of all heterosexual immigrants, and Concia, representative of all white homosexuals, but there is an insurmountable wall separating both of them from all the rest of Italian people who are supposed to be white and heterosexual although Mafiosi.

The triviality of this scheme brings me to another schematic statement by Jasbir Puar: "The homosexual other is white, the racial other is straight" (Puar, 2007, p. 32)□. This scheme is either provocative but also explicative. In fact, she highlights how the construction of a homonationalist feeling develops within a wider tendency defined "ascendancy of whiteness". Puar underlines that biopower succeeds in multiplying and incorporating differences in its own project, shaping adequate bodies. From this perspective, we can analyze Italian discriminatory discourse not as a racist and homophobic desire to exterminate differences, rather as a liberal attitude of innocuous inclusion of these same differences. This technique of assimilation produces a paradigm of inclusion/exclusion mostly located in the judgment of tolerability. Clearly, a homosexual or a racialized subject could be tolerable if s/he pays his/her dues to the nations. However s/he could be defined as an intolerable subversive, or even a terrorist if s/he practices polygamy, for this is unacceptable both for queer and racialized subjects. Therefore, this paradigm is the standard to fit into nationalist homonormative desires, in order to gain the status of docile patriot and dare to gain the status of full citizens.



Img. 2 “You call *us* dirty nigger and icky dyke but you feel offended if they call *you* Mafioso Italian”.
Produced by ARCI in 2009.

ITALO MASK – THE RISE OF A RIGHT WING MOVEMENT

The rise of right wing homosexual movement, as well as the new racist attitude of former associations are the common trend in different countries around Europe. From this standpoint, the experience of Pim Fortuyn, Peter Tatchell's march in London are not isolated cases, they are indeed the expression of a political configuration to come. Therefore Butler's refusal of the *Civil Courage Prize* managed to enlighten the *fil rouge* keeping the last prides in Europe together: racism and islamophobia.

As far as Italy is concerned, the most ambiguous “hetero mask” and perhaps the most frightening is represented by Italo. As the poster states: “Italo, 33 years old, hates fags, but he's in love with his comrade.” (img.3) Bologna Pride invited anyone and everyone to take part, including the fascists. I chose to conclude this overview with this icon because I think that it embodies the risks of this slip from pride to chauvinism, and with one more little step to fascism. As a matter of fact, the episode of Bologna Pride was not the only moment of this “*dangerous liaisons*”.

After a season of homophobic violence, with a clear ideological matrix, Democratic Party member of Parliament Paola Concia has begun to turn towards *Casa Pound* in order to open a dialogue with these “young guys”. *Casa Pound* is a fascist association born in a squatted building in the center of Rome. Its comrades used to call themselves “third millennium fascists”, in order to define their futurist, secular, pop aim. However, although the new rhetoric projects to be accepted in the civil society, the “good guys” image is betrayed by the claim of fascist ideal through aggressions and violence. The topic of this dialogue will be homosexual unions, in reference to *Casa Pound's* document entitled “civil unions rights and duties”. The

heart of this document is the reason why homosexual civil unions, and not just homosexual individuals, should be accepted. As a matter of fact, civil unions exist already in the body of the nation and then these subjects, as Italians, not as homosexuals, exist and can be recognized as such only if they don't destabilize the order of national community, therefore only if they are in couple permanently.

Whether we think that gays and lesbians should or should not have the right to marry, we might consider that this fight has been central to the wider fight for gay visibility. This is the reason why this document introduces an element that cannot be overlooked in this analysis of homonationalism. We can see how a struggle of the homosexual movement has become a concession: the demand for recognition has become the cage, trapping homosexuals into establishing what are to be the regulatory standards of access to the national community, for subjects still considered "different". Amy Brandzel enlightens the bondage among gay marriage and citizenship. In fact marriage is predicated on the demarcation of homosexual bodies as outside the bounds of citizenship, through the right to build up a family. For centuries institutions have been founded on nuclear heteronormative families defining heterosexuality as prerequisite for citizenship and national belonging (Brandzel, 2005)□,

In Italy, declared fascist organizations have been far from the public scene for many years and officially forbidden by the laws. De facto, *Casa Pound* represents the concrete limits of these laws, expressing the diffusion of an openly fascist association, looking for consensus besides those who feel nostalgic of the fascist experience. The relationship with representative of gay and lesbian associations is essential to build the third millennium ideal fascist, in order to reinforce a comforting image for new fascists without betraying traditional values. Hence, thanks to national chauvinism, it is possible to define the conditions to be assimilated in the Italian people, even if homosexual.

This document clarifies the contents around which *Casa Pound* engages arguments with homosexuals, but it isn't so clear what pushes a self-declared spokesperson for the homosexual movement to go into the Temple of Italian fascism. Going in the depth of this analysis, Concia and, more generally, most "mainstream" homosexual associations that supported her in this experience, they were looking for an openness of the political right because of their real power outside Parliament in the common thought in Italy. It would probably seem that the pursuit of acknowledgment in a patriarchal and normative society can only pass through an accreditation as interlocutor of the most popular far right organizations. Exactly what Casa Pound is.

Summing up, despite gay love towards Fatherland not being mutual, the relationship between Casa Pound and mainstream homosexual associations, on the contrary, seem as they might flirt: they need each other to perform as inoffensive subjects. This ambiguous bondage is possible by building a common ground. This is definitely represented by a common sense of belonging to a national community founded on the values of fatherland and family.



Img.3 "Italo hates fags, but he's in love with his comrade" produced by Gay.it in 2008.

CONCLUSION

Along this short analysis of Italian Homonationalism through images, I analyzed how homonormativity, and its nationalist declination, works through the production and taxonomy of racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed behaviors and practices. De facto the political and juridical neither European nor Italian space is shaped as a homogeneous unity made up of legitimate and not legitimate identities, inside and outside subject; on the contrary citizenship is complex contradictory process. Each individual can be placed inside or outside the boundaries of full citizenship at any time, because of working condition, race and sexuality .

I used the lens of the "heterosexual mask" and following Fanon's scheme I tried to illustrate that the homosexual is the one who only mimics its assimilation into the Italian society. Though I didn't describe why s/he is not considered a subject itself because s/he can be debunked at all times as "imitator". This process of subjectivation could prevent the establishment of gays and lesbians as a subject of global transformation or self-transformation, preferring to be assimilated, even if as subordinates.

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