

TALE E QUALE, OR NOT REALLY?

Blackface and the construction of Mediterranean Whiteness on Italian television

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Abstract

In November 2020, on the Italian national television broadcast *Tale e quale show (TQS)*, participant Sergio Muñiz imitated Tunisian-Italian rapper, Ghali, with a performance that received backlash from Ghali himself because of its use of blackface. This is not the first time that blackface was used on *TQS*, but the first time that it was used to imitate an Italian artist. In this paper, I analyze what implications this performance has from the perspectives of Cultural Studies, History, and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies. I argue that the performance invokes Mediterranean Whiteness to differentiate North-Mediterranean populations from their racialized South-Mediterranean ‘Others’.

1. Introduction

In November 2020 a controversy erupted when, on the *Tale e quale show (TQS)*, broadcast on the Italian national television channel Rai1, participant Sergio Muñiz imitated Tunisian-Italian rapper Ghali not only with autotune but also by darkening his skin (“Ghali contro”, 2020; Rai, 2020). Ghali responded with Instagram stories in which he reprimanded the show for continually using blackface to imitate people of color (“Ghali contro”, 2020). The *TQS* is a contest in which Italian celebrities impersonate famous musicians in dress and performance. The show has frequently sparked protest because of its contestants’ blackface performances, for instance, of Beyonce, James

Brown, and Stevie Wonder (Njegosh, 2016). Despite the controversies, the show has continued this practice, and has ignored all accusations (Njegosh, 2016).

However, I argue that the imitation of Ghali gives the practice a different dimension because Ghali is Italian, born to Tunisian parents in Italy, and thus, is one of the children of immigrants that are changing Italy by destabilizing rigid notions of Italianness. The issue is complicated even more because Sergio Muñiz is a Spanish actor who is a celebrity in Italy. I argue that Muñiz's blackface did not enhance the impersonation, but differentiated Ghali as an 'Other,' non-Italian and non-White. In this paper, therefore, I discuss how the intersections of nationality, religion, race, and ethnicity work to define Italians and other North-Mediterranean populations as White, and differentiate them from their racialized Brown, Muslim, South-Mediterranean 'Others'. Taking an interdisciplinary approach that combines Cultural Studies, History, and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, I discuss the following question: How does the blackface impersonation of Ghali on the *Tale e quale* show reflect the construction of Mediterranean Whiteness?

To answer this question, I first discuss the historical background of Italian differentiation from other Mediterranean populations across the sea. Considering my case study, I focus on the differentiation of Italians from Tunisians. Second, I discuss the construction of Italian 'Mediterranean Whiteness', as explained by Giuliani (2015). Third, I analyze the case study of Muñiz's Ghali impersonation. Last, I summarize my points, and argue that this controversy points to a larger conflict in Italy between the reaffirmation of a nationally homogenous identity, and the reality of multiculturalism. The blackface performance ultimately reinforces the differentiation between Italians and Tunisians, and, on a broader level, white North- and black/brown South-Mediterranean populations.

2. Splitting the Mediterranean

Italy and Tunisia have a long history of diverse relations dating back to the Roman Empire, with continued trade ties and mutual migration flows (Choate, 2010). However, the border fortification and European integration of Italy has involved an ethnic and racial differentiation between people on the Northern and Southern shores of the

Mediterranean (Choate, 2010). In the following section, I examine diverse reasons for the differentiation between Italians and Tunisians.

Overall, considering the historical ties between Italy and Tunisia, the ethnic distinction between Italians and Tunisians is not a clear-cut affair. Moreover, the impositions of such a distinction are artificial and closely connected to Italy's colonial aspirations. Italy, as a newly formed state in 1861 tried to establish hold of Tunisia to confirm its position as a valid power on the European continent (Choate, 2010). Despite the large population of Italians in Tunisia, France colonized Tunisia in 1881. The question of legitimate Tunisian colonization was much disputed in the following decades, since wealthy Italians had invested more into building infrastructures in Tunisia than the French. To Italians, Tunisia was a kind of natural colony because of Italy's demographic presence and continued investment in the country. Subsequently, Italy's patronizing relationship towards Tunisia was reinforced by Mussolini's revival of a Roman *mare nostrum*. Through this, Mussolini advocated that Italians should reclaim their natural position as the rulers of the Mediterranean, and as benefactors and educators of the supposedly backward and barbaric Arab populations. Mussolini's *mare nostrum* never came to life, but even after World War Two, Italy tried to establish a legitimate claim to Tunisia; the other European powers declined the claim in light of the country's fascist past. However, Italy's colonial mindset and self-perception as the rulers of the Mediterranean never completely left the public consciousness, and they still inform the patronizing relationship towards Tunisia and other North-African countries (Choate, 2010). Thus, even though Italian and Tunisian populations lived side-by-side, Italy's colonial mindset and aspirations differentiated Tunisians from Italians as backward and barbaric.

Second, the ethnic distinction between Italians and Tunisians is connected to the relationship between Northern and Southern Italy. According to Giglioli (2017), after Italy's unification Northern Italy used the idea of the socio-economic backwardness and racial difference of Southern Italy to reaffirm the North's Europeanness. This narrative was reinforced by testimonials of French administrators in Tunisia, who described the strong similarities between Sicilians and Tunisians; Tunisians were described as almost identical to Sicilians in their manners, social interactions, and overall behavior. However, these testimonials already also state the difference between their religious affiliations, and for the French the Muslim Tunisians were unassimilable (Giglioli, 2017). These

statements already reflect the perception of Tunisians that came to define them in the late 20th century as Muslim ‘Others’. The second half of the 20th century first saw the decolonization of Tunisia, and then increased immigration of Tunisians to Sicily (Giglioli, 2017). This immigration was not rejected, but rather welcomed as a possibility for Sicily to strengthen its relations with Northern Africa, gain political and economic strength in the Mediterranean, and recruit cheap labor for agriculture and manufacture in Sicily. Furthermore, it saw increased cultural interest in the region’s Arab past, much to the worry of Italy’s central government (Giglioli, 2017). Thus, the close relationship between Sicily and Tunisia was marked by mutual migration and exchange that lasted until late into the 20th century, and their similarities were until then used to define the North as European and superior, and the South as Arab and inferior.

Third, the ethnic differentiation between Italians and Tunisians is tied to the Mediterranean border-separation that came with the formation of the European Union (EU) (Giglioli, 2017). In the 1990s, as Italy entered the EU, the Schengen agreement vanquished internal frontiers, but reinstated external ones. For the first time, visa requirements were introduced for Tunisians and migrant detention centers were set up in Sicily. Thus, what was before seen as a natural and mutual relationship between Sicily and Tunisia became ‘the issue of immigration’, with Tunisians in the detention camps being seen as outsiders of Sicily, and hence, outsiders of Europe. The Southern question of Sicily’s difference from Northern Italy lost attention and was replaced by the construction of a border to Tunisia and Northern Africa in general. Tunisia, which had before been considered the ‘deep South’ of Italy, became non-Italy and non-Europe, divided from the ‘West’ through the sea border. Together with the fortification of national borders, the EU’s formation also saw the change of Italian laws regarding citizenship, which since 1992 have come to privilege *jus sanguinis* over *jus soli*, and the debate around the naturalization of immigrants as Italian citizens has come to center around the idea of their assimilation to ‘Italianness’ (Giglioli, 2017). Thus, with Tunisians’ demarcation as the ‘Muslim Other’, all similarities between Italians and Tunisians were suddenly and willfully forgotten, and Italy came to first define Sicilians as Italian, and secondly Italians as European.

3. Conceptualizing Mediterranean Whiteness

Italian Whiteness is a product of the last century which has witnessed fluid and relational articulations (Njegosh, 2015). Italians have been both victims of racialization, for instance, as immigrants in the United States, as well as perpetrators, especially during the colonial and fascist periods. Njegosh (2015) writes about how, in 1937, Mussolini introduced a law against sexual relations between Italians and people of the African colonies, which was a first step towards the conceptualization of 'Mediterranean Whiteness'. This 'Mediterranean Whiteness', as explained by Giuliani (2015), was conceptualized hand-in-hand with the Italian nation, as an organically developed community that brought together a mix of the best Mediterranean lineages. This imagined community was built on common values that were closely tied to Catholicism and the notion of being the birthplace of European civilization. Thus, 'Mediterranean Whiteness' of Italians is a combination of both blood and cultural lineage, that does not deny ethno-racial mixing, but affirms its own racial superiority as a result of that mixing (Giuliani, 2015).

This ethno-racial mixing was, however, only invoked to justify the past, and then applied to refute any future mixing with 'abject,' 'undesirable' races and lineages, such as the African or Arab (Giuliani, 2015). Hence, Italians became Mediterranean and White; they retained the cultural lineage of the Mediterranean, but they were simultaneously and symbolically de-epidermized as White. This Whiteness is always defined against an abject Other, and this Other becomes the carrier of race; thus, the White Mediterranean exists only in contrast to the Black or Brown Mediterranean. Epidermization, the ascription of symbolic value to the skin is, therefore, invoked relationally; while people South of the Mediterranean are epidermized as Black and Brown, those North of the Mediterranean are de-epidermized as White (Giuliani, 2015). According to Giuliani (2015) this Mediterranean Whiteness has since then been made invisible, silenced by the taboo of talking about race after the horrors of World War Two, but has been ever-present in the assigning of privilege and social hierarchies in Italian society. In today's context especially, the presence of North-African immigrants, and their children who grow up in Italy, threatens the stability of Italians' Mediterranean Whiteness, but it also requires to be re-asserted more forcefully (Giuliani, 2015).

4. Case Study: Muñiz's impersonation of Ghali

In this section I analyze the case study of Sergio Muñiz's impersonation of Ghali on the *TQS*.¹ The case at hand is a complex one, since it involves a Spanish man who is an Italian celebrity, impersonating an Italian with Tunisian origins on Italian national television. For the performance Muñiz wore a wig with red dreadlocks and a colorful cardigan over preppy shorts and shirt, a style similar to Ghali's attire which is known to be multicolored and playful (Allen, 2019). However, Muñiz did not stop at this and decided to mask his own Mediterranean tan with a pasty ochre color which gave his look a carnivalesque quality. This is not the first time that a color-line was used on *TQS* to denote racial difference. In a recent analysis of the blackface practices on *TQS*, Njegosh (2016) argues that the show implies a Whiteness that is based on the racial purity of the contestants who are all Italians by blood, including Karima Ammar, whose mother is Italian and father Algerian. All of the contestants were presumed to be White, with the exception of Karima Ammar, who by using both blackface and whiteface in her performances was coded as neither Black nor White (Njegosh, 2016). In the following, I argue, first, that Muñiz's impersonation of Ghali does not break with this tradition of performative Whiteness on the *TQS*, even though he is not Italian by blood. Second, I argue that the blackface impersonation of Ghali reinforces North-Mediterranean Whiteness and Europeanness. Third, I argue that it reinforces the notion of non-assimilability of Muslims.

In the case at hand, the contestant is not Italian by blood, but by association. As he recounts in an interview, Sergio Muñiz is Spanish, but he has lived in Italy since 1995 (Rai, 2018). Moreover, he has been a visible part of Italian mainstream media, appearing in television commercials, reality shows, series, movies, and talk shows (Rai, 2018). Thus, even though he is not Italian by blood, he is an Italian celebrity and has assimilated to Italian culture. Therefore, having Muñiz as a contestant to represent Italians does not break with *TQS*'s tradition of performative Whiteness, that, until then, consisted of only contestants who are Italians by blood (Njegosh, 2016). Instead, it reflects the notion of Mediterranean Whiteness that is extended to other North-Mediterraneans.

¹ For a visual reference of Muñiz's impersonation of Ghali, see the Facebook video at the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=119684513123682>

Furthermore, having a contestant from another European country reaffirms Italy's internationality and diversity but only to an acceptable extent. First, this echoes Italy's fascist narrative of acceptable and desirable cultural and racial mixing. Hence, Muñiz is coded as similar to Italians, assimilable, and of the same value; his cultural assimilation is seen as valuable and desirable, in contrast to racialized Others. Second, this also reaffirms Italy as part of the European continent, where other 'Europeans' are culturally and phenotypically similar. Thus, the coding of another European as 'one of our own' is a step towards a more international conception of Italian culture. However, this internationality is only extended to 'acceptable' individuals like Muñiz who are, as I will show in the following, coded as White.

Muñiz's use of blackface to impersonate Ghali implies that accurate representation necessitates racial differentiation in the form of darker make-up (Njegosh, 2016). The phrase 'tale e quale' in Italian means that someone is identical to someone else, and the show, therefore, requires an accurate representation. Such impersonations usually emphasize particular characteristics of a person that are referenced through certain symbolic repertoires, in order to make the impersonation unquestionable. Hence, when impersonating Ghali, Muñiz and the *TQS* team found it necessary to emphasize Ghali's Otherness through the symbolic repertoire of racial difference (Njegosh, 2016). As Njegosh (2016) writes, the *TQS* show is known to interpret race as a hard fact which is separated through a color line into a black/white binary. This repertoire is always referenced through pasty and thick make-up, which is homogenous and without any shading; almost literally a mask (Njegosh, 2016). The impersonation of Ghali is no exception: even though Muñiz himself arguably has a darker complexion than Ghali, he and the *TQS* team opted to cover his face in a brownish, ochre paste that even covered his eyebrows and had no gradations. Thus, what is thought to be an accurate representation is not only mimetic, but also symbolic, and uses the repertoire of the racial color line to denote difference.

Concomitantly, by epidermizing Ghali as Brown, Muñiz – behind the mask - is de-epidermized as White. Thus, Mediterranean Whiteness is extended to Spaniards in contrast to the Mediterranean Blackness of Tunisians. Ghali is racialized to define Muñiz as White. Moreover, while Ghali is racialized, Muñiz's race is made invisible; Ghali becomes the carrier of race while Muñiz is deracialized. Muñiz, behind the mask, is a person, an individual (Njegosh, 2016). The mask, however, is a symbol of a

de-humanized mass, a racial object, an Other. This visualization of difference renders Ghali as unassimilable and heterogeneous to the norm of invisibilized Whiteness that underscores Italianness (Njegosh, 2016). Thus, Ghali's epidermization as Brown racializes and objectifies him as an unassimilable Other, while Muñiz's de-epidermization de-racializes and individualizes him as part of the assimilable norm.

Finally, not only the blackface but also the clothes Muñiz wore to imitate Ghali contribute to this Othering. The clothes are a bit too tight, just enough to accentuate Muñiz's muscly figure, and while Ghali is indeed slenderer than Muñiz the irony of this wardrobe choice leaves a rather bitter aftertaste. First, the tight clothing makes Muñiz appear bigger and 'manlier', which is supposed to be funny because it signifies that Ghali's small clothes do not fit Muñiz, but on a symbolic level it also infantilizes Ghali. It makes Muñiz appear mature and manly, while Ghali is supposedly immature and infantilized. This all too clearly recalls colonial narratives of Italians' patronizing position with regards to Tunisians. Tunisians were perceived as inferior to Italians and in need of Italian patronage to prosper. Similarly, Ghali is portrayed as a little boy in contrast to Muñiz, inferior to his mature manliness. Hence, combined with the blackface, Muñiz's clothing choice reinforces ideas of North-Mediterranean and European superiority and condescension towards racialized Others.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how Sergio Muñiz's impersonation of Ghali on the *TQS* reflects the construction of Mediterranean Whiteness. I argued that the Tunisian and Italian populations are actually quite similar and have had long connections. However, with Italy's unification their relationship shifted considerably. First, Italy established a narrative of patronizing superiority to justify their colonial aspirations in the Mediterranean basin. Second, the differentiation between Northern and Southern Italy comprised of a racial differentiation that took the South's close connection with Tunisia as a sign of their racial inferiority and backwardness. The North used this narrative to portray itself as more European. Third, with the foundation of the EU, the Mediterranean border was fortified, and while Southern Italy was integrated into the idea of Italianness, Tunisians and other North-Africans were designated as the Muslim and racialized Others which would come to act as a counterpart to a presumably homogeneous Italian identity

and a European identity. Then, I have argued that Mediterranean Whiteness is a result of fascist narratives that defined Italians as the beacon racial and cultural mixing in the Mediterranean. This narrative comprised a de-epidermization of Italians as White against the backdrop of their racialized Black and Brown Others, with whom racial and cultural mixing was objected.

The blackface impersonation of Ghali reflects these narratives and historical processes in several ways. First, Muñiz is pinned against Ghali as a desirable and assimilable individual. His participation reaffirms Italy's integration into the European continent, and extends Mediterranean Whiteness to other North-Mediterranean populations like the Spanish. Second, the use of blackface to impersonate Ghali shows that, from Muñiz's and *TQS*' perspective, accurate representation of Ghali necessitates the differentiation through the symbolic repertoire of race. Thus, Ghali is epidermized as a Brown Other that, in contrast, de-epidermizes Muñiz as White, and while Ghali is objectified as a racialized Other, Muñiz is individualized as a White subject. Ghali's Otherness is, hence, visualized, while Muñiz's Whiteness is rendered invisible behind the mask of blackface. This contributes to the configuration of Ghali as a heterogenous, unassimilable Other. Furthermore, the clothing that Muñiz wears infantilizes Ghali through contrast and echoes the notion of North-Mediterranean superiority. Hence, this performance overall reflects Muñiz's assimilation to Mediterranean Whiteness and Italianness, while it visualizes the presumed unassimilability of the racialized, Muslim Other, Ghali.

Indeed, Ghali is one individual who puts Italy's homogenous racial identity into question. Thus, the blackface used to impersonate Ghali expresses a need to distinguish individuals who threaten this homogeneous identity. At the moment, the increasing visibility of Muslim and other racialized minorities puts the stability of Italianness into question, not only culturally but also with regards to citizenship. The 'new' Italians destabilize Italy's *jus sanguinis* citizenship policy, as well as the reality and tangibility of the physical and racial border that separates the Mediterranean. Thus, performances like Muñiz's on the *TQS* reflect the insecurity and forceful need to reassert Mediterranean Whiteness and superiority, but also reveal its artificiality and obsolescence.

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