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ENG523
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Week Eight Exercise: Hearing Othello's Carnality

Othello 1.3.143-156:

Othello

143 It was my hint to speak — such was my process —
144 And of the cannibals that each other eat,
145 The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
146 Do grow beneath their shoulders. This to hear
147 Would Desdemona seriously incline,
148 But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
149 Which ever as she could with haste dispatch
150 She'd come again, and with greedy ear
151 Devour up my discourse; which I, observing,
152 Took once a pliant hour and found good means
153 To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart
154 That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,
155 Whereof by parcels she had something heard
156 But not intentively.

In *Othello*, bodily sight and phonic sound between persons are oftentimes associated with one another, if not outright conjoined: for instance, Othello cries, “thou echo'st me / As if there were some monster in thy thought / Too hideous to be shown” (3.3.109-11). Sometimes, more specifically, interactions between speakers and listeners are portrayed as digestion. Can we hear Othello's visualized body through himself and others? To explore this, this week's piece places some of Othello's (and Iago's) language about Desdemona onto one of the maps of the medieval Italian thinker and writer Opicinus de Canistris, renowned for his impenetrably complex fourteenth-century cartography. This map appears in MS Vat.lat.6535, fol.74^v.

Othello's body is figured as a carnal Other that Desdemona digests via sight and sound. In the passage above, which inspired this piece, Othello states that Desdemona would “with greedy ear / Devour up my discourse” (150-1), and later, Iago claims that Desdemona's “eye must be fed, and what delight shall she have to look on the devil?” (2.1.223-4), referring to Othello. These passages' appearance in the upper left of Opicinus's map reflects Othello and Desdemona's relationship: Othello's line from 1.3 manifests between the mouth of the black African monk on the left-hand side of fol.74^v and the ear of the white European Christ (Desdemona is indeed “fair” [4.2.227], which alludes to both being “fair-skinned” and “free from moral stain” [Arden Shakespeare *Othello*, ed. by Honingmann, 1.3.291n]), and Iago's line from 2.1 appears just above an arrow that connects the monk's eyes to Christ's. This arrow is multidirectional, which echoes Mladen Dolar's discussion of an interpretive “double movement” (550) between self and other in the context of social speech. Just as “there is no voice without the other” (549), so too are Self and Other brought together here. The aural cartographically conjoined with the visual provides an axis upon which Other is consumed by, and thus carnally

brought *into*, Self: “If she be black, and thereto have a wit, / She’ll find a white that shall her blackness fit” (2.1.132-33).

Also between the bodies of the monk and Christ is the semicolon after “discourse” (1.3.151). Its appearance and position nod toward Bruce Smith’s discussion of Renaissance understandings of rhetoric as human anatomy: “if commas are the bones of the hands and feet, if colons are thighbones, [and if] periods figure as the head” (238), then a semicolon from *Othello* mapped onto one of Opicinus’s sketches signifies the relationship *between*, rather than *on* or *within*, bodies. In a way, it is visually, aurally, and syntactically a comma, colon, and period in simultaneity. Moreover, Othello’s “Hum!” (5.2.36) manifests between the bodies, answered in the play by Desdemona’s “you’re fatal then / When your eyes roll so” (5.2.37-8). Its lack of quotation marks denotes it as a voice that gestures toward interpretive visual meaning without inherently embodying meaning itself. Here, it is a cartographic counterpart to Dolar’s phonemic “fleshless and boneless entity defined purely by its function” (542). The shared color underlines voice as communication, despite lack of phonemic signification.

Within, rather than between, the African monk and European Christ are Othello’s lines about cannibalistic monstrous races. North Africa’s emptiness contrasts Christ’s (Desdemona’s) full cosmological charts, filled here by Othello’s exotic marvels of African Otherness (1.3.144-6). Furthermore, his words about Desdemona’s inclination toward his speech (1.3.146-7) are tilted within Desdemona’s body to reflect Christ’s leaning toward Africa on Opicinus’s map. Visualized speech reflects its figurative meaning here.

As Opicinus’s maps invite one to read geographic bodies, and figure the European Self as hearing the African Other, a sound-sight dyad connects Desdemona and Othello. This piece thus lies somewhere within Smith’s “*imaginative phenomena*” (243) of sound, because *Othello* conceptually blurs the aural and visual within the digested corporeal. Othello is aurally imagined.

