MOOR AND MEDUSA:
IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OTHELLO

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Imagine Shakespeare wandering in the streets of Venice, his well-thumbed copy of the *Hecatommithi* in his pouch, trying to give a face to the nameless Moor of Giraldi Cinthio's tale who would become Othello.[1] In a further flight of fancy, we see him seeking the assistance of a local guide with his unusual question "Who are the Moors of Venice? Where are they?"

"Moor," the critic Emily Bartels cautions us, is "first and foremost a figure of uncodified and uncodifiable diversity" in the early modern age.[2] In Italy, and in Venice's records in particular, the terminology is even more confusing: "the words that could be used to indicate African origin or dark skin color—*nero, negro, moro, saraceno*—were nearly all fluid or ambivalent, with the exception of the Italian *di Ghinea* (or its Latin equivalent), which definitely indicated a place of origin in sub-Saharan Africa, and *ethiops* or *etiope*."[3] Illuminating writings on the African presence in Venice and the representation of blackness in Venetian art have been written by art historians such as Paul Kaplan and Kate Lowe, and elaborated upon by contemporary artists such as Fred Wilson.[4] While some interesting overlappings will be discussed below, the focus of this essay is on a few artifacts where the term "Moor" is generally applied to figures that complicate the association with blackness and Africa.[5]

"*Mori*" (Moors) in Venice are associated with squares, streets, inns, statues, sculptures, jewels and even with patisserie. In Piazza San Marco alone, the center of the city, we can locate three different and equally exemplary Moors. The most visible are the bell-jacks on the summit of the Clock Tower built by Mauro Codussi between 1496 and 1499. These colossi constitute "[t]he first, large-scale, functional work of art in bronze to be commissioned in Renaissance Venice" and even though contemporary documents identify them as *Ziganti* (giants), for at least three centuries they have been popularly referred to as "Moors," probably as a result of the dark brown colour of the bronze or the patina that formed on the surface.[6] Before we return to the phenomenon whereby moorishness is less in the intentions of the artist than in the eyes of the beholder, we may observe another Moor inhabiting the same site. Looking up at the tower from the square, the traveller of four centuries ago would have seen what

[1] Karina F. Attar, "Genealogy of a Character: A Reading of Giraldi's Moor," in Laura Tosi and Shaul Bassi, eds., in *Visions of Venice in Shakespeare* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 47-64. In this essay I often reference the research work that Alberto Toso Fei and I carried out and collected in *Shakespeare in Venice: Exploring the City with Shylock and Othello* (Treviso: Elzeviro, 2007).

[2] Emily C. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: from Alcazar to Othello* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 5. See also Jack D'Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991); Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

[3] Kate Lowe, "Visible lives: black gondoliers and other black Africans in Renaissance Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 66:2 (2013), 416.

[4] Paul H.D. Kaplan "Black Turks: Venetian Artists and the Perception of Ottoman Ethnicity," in James Harper, ed., *The Turk and Islam in the Western Eye, 1450-1750: Visual Imagery before Orientalism* (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 41-66; "Local Color: The Black African Presence in Venetian Art and History," in *Fred Wilson: Speak of Me as I Am*, catalogue to the Exhibition by Fred Wilson at the American Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale (Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2003), 8-19 (Italian translation on 50-56); reprinted in *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader*, Doro Globus, ed., (London: Ridinghouse, 2011), 186-98.

nowadays we can admire only twice a year, during the week following Ascension Day and on the Feast of Epiphany; from one of the two doors at the sides of the dial, where normally we see the hours and minutes, the Three Magi emerge in procession and bow before the Virgin. One of them, the dark-skinned king often identified as Balthasar, echoes the "fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow unmoving finger at" (4.2.54-6) which Othello fears he has become. Moving then towards the corner between the Basilica and the Doge's Palace, we find the group of the Tetrarchs, four figures of warriors embracing each other, probably sculpted in Egypt in the fourth century from a single block of porphyry (fig. 1).[7]

This ancient artifact was part of the rich spoils that the Venetians captured from Costantinople during the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204). Wedged at the side of the religious edifice and at the boundary with the Doge's palace, the embracing figures embody the conjuction of spiritual and temporal powers that the Serenissima built its own imperial myth upon, under the aegis of Saint Mark the Evangelist. Archeologists and historians have long puzzled over the statues, whose broken foot was found in Istanbul. Whether they depict the Emperor Diocletian and the other members of the tetrarchy, or the successors of Constantine, they were certainly meant to symbolize *fraternitas, concordia, similitudo*—brotherhood, harmony, similarity—powerful political allegories that would be supplanted by antithetical narratives. Because these liminal figures, positioned at the threshold of the sacred and the secular, of the East and the West (Egypt, Turkey and Venice—a Mediterranean geography oddly reminiscent of *Othello*), have been radically changed through history, and whatever their originary identity and function, their dislocation allowed Venetians to weave ever new narratives around them. Thomas Coryat, the author of the most extensive account of Venice given by a contemporary of Shakespeare, described them in 1608 as the statues of "foure Noble Gentlemen of Albania that were brothers" who came to Venice "in a ship laden with great store of riches." While two landed and two remained onboard, both groups conspired against the other to appropriate the entire fortune and decided to poison the other brothers. The logical conclusion was that "all foure dyed shortly after. Whereupon the Signiory of Venice seised upon all their goods as their owne, which was the first treasure that ever Venice possessed."[8] This version, where the plunderers are punished by reciprocal poisoning and their statues remain as a warning against future attempts at violating the precious relics, seems to be supported by the late thirteenth-century sculpted frieze below; this depicts two *putti* emerging from the mouths of two dragons bearing a cartouche inscribed with one of the earliest examples of vernacular language in Venice: "*L'om po far e die in pensar—E vega quelo che gli po inchontrar*" (which loosely translates as: "Men may do and say whatever they feel like—and then they'll learn the consequences"). In an ironical twist of history, a symbol of political fraternity and concord becomes a parable of greed and betrayal; the brothers become enemies, the hunted becomes the hunter. However a further twist is that while early variants of the anecdote describe the culprits as Albanians or Greeks, later versions make of them four Saracens (or Moors) who were tur-

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[5] The obvious reference here is to the multivolume opus *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, published by Belknap Press.

[6] Victoria Avery, *Vulcan's Forge in Venus' City: The Story of Bronze in Venice, 1350-1650* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 93.

[7] *L'enigma dei Tetrarchi*, Quaderni della Procuratoria (Venezia: Marsilio, 2013). Otto Demus, *Le sculture esterne di San Marco* (Milano: Electa, 1995), 222-6. See the political reading by Paul Veyne, *L'Impero greco romano. Le radici del mondo globale* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2009), 696-7.

[8] Thomas Coryat, "Coryates Crudities" in David Whittaker, ed., *Most Glorious & Peerless Venice: Observations of Thomas Coryate (1608)* (Charlbury: Wavestone Press, 2013), 39-41.

ned to stone as they tried to steal the Treasure of St. Mark's. A late fifteenth or early-sixteenth Greek poem refers to them as "*quattro insanguinati e allora prendono la deliberazione di rubare ... E quelli furono impietrati e rimasero come pietre*" [four bloodstained individuals who, having determined to steal, were petrified and remained there as stone"].[9] The red coloration of the porphyry suggesting the image of blood, acquired in a later version of the myth a very different meaning, well summarized by an eighteenth-century commentator: "*Volgarmente vien detto che questi fossero Mori i quali volessero rubare il Tesoro [di San Marco]*" [It is commonly said that these were the Moors who wanted to steal the Treasure (of Saint Mark's)].[10] Yet the anonymous Greek poet, who according to Lionello Levi had heard the story from "*qualche Cicerone indigeno di quei tempi*" [some native Cicerone of those days],[11] added a detail that made the admonition even more ominous: these are not the effigies of the criminals, but the criminals themselves turned into stone on account of their impious act.

The representation of Saint Mark's Tetrarchs as "petrified Moors" appears as a flagrant example of projective identification; not only were the Tetrachs themselves removed from Constantinople, but the anecdote grotesquely reverses the actual theft, the famous, ingenious stealing of the body of Saint Mark from Alexandria.[12] According to the legend that the Republic of Venice adopted as its own political and religious founding myth, two Venetian merchants smuggled the remains of the Evangelist out of Egypt by concealing them under a layer of pork, prohibited and repugnant to the Muslim custom officers.[13] Even in the case of Rioba and his brothers, one can hypothesize that dishonest conduct in commerce, hardly a rarity in a rich trading community such as Venice, is conveniently projected onto foreign merchants, coming from the distant Orient. In both cases, undoubtedly, statues that have historically little in common are represented by the *vox populi* as Moors turned into stone on account of crimes and sins perpetrated against the Christian faith and community. Hence, while philology and archeology show how the signifier "Moor" mutates in time and place, the popular Venetian myths seem to fossilize meaning in solid stone, recalling that intense moment of the Shakespearan text where Othello manifests his anxiety at becoming the target of his new fellow citizens' derision and contempt: "The fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow and moving finger at!" (4.2.60-61) That this image, as we noticed already, corresponds almost literally to the Black Magus that in his slow parade on the Clock Tower must have the hands of the dial pointed at him, is just a tantalizing coincidence. Two centuries after Shakespeare, the alliterative phrase "fixed figure" would be translatable with a new word of Greek derivation: *stereotype*. Othello's apprehension is the mirror figure of Roderigo's, who denounces the elusive nature of the Moor as an "extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere" (1.1.134-135), a feeling that Zygmunt Bauman has termed, as regards a different minority which has traditionally perturbed Western society, *proteophobia*.[14] Where Othello is afraid of being fixed in an immutable form, Roderigo fears precisely his shapelessness, the absence of a stable and hence controllable identity. To fix, appropriately enough, means both to "fasten (something) securely in a particular place or position" and "direct one's eyes, mind, or attention steadily or unwaveringly towards."[15] Othello is *fixed* in every sense of the word: scrutinized by others with curiosity and fear, fastened in manageable figures; he also becomes *fixated*, obsessed by the gaze, keen to see at all cost even that which is not there (Desdemona's adultery) and horrified by the prospect of being regarded with contempt.

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[9] Lionello Levi, "Una curiosa leggenda veneziana in un carme neogreco," *Ateneo Veneto*, 34 (1911), 125-40.

[10] Levi, "Una curiosa leggenda," 130.

[11] Levi, "Una curiosa leggenda," 133.

[12] Sansovino (p. 39) reports an attempted robbery of the sacred relics by a Greek man called Stamatti. See Levi, 134.

[13] Reinhard Lebe, *Quando San Marco approdò a Venezia: il culto dell'evangelista e il miracolo politico della Repubblica di Venezia* (Roma: Il Veltro, 1981).

[14] Zygmunt Bauman, "Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern," in Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus, eds., Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew' (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 148.

All the main meanings of "fixing" come together in the archetype of petrification, the myth of Medusa, a creature whose adventures unravel between Northern Africa and its European borders.[16] In her "intrinsic doubleness, at once monster and beauty, disease and cure, threat and protection, poison and remedy,"[17] the Gorgone appears as an instrument of offense and defense, lethal weapon and shield against the enemy, "a representation of the Other by virtue of her absolute and terrifying difference."[18] As a frequently represented subject, it epitomizes the "apotropaic dimension of art" and celebrates "the strategic taming of [...] uncivilized forces to civilizational ends."[19] In our case study, the petrifying gaze is invoked in its defensive function, that which leads Perseus to lay the severed head of Medusa on his shield. As Ovid recalls in *The Metamorphoses*, this weapon was used to punish the giant Atlas, who had tried to drive Perseus away from his domain and was turned into a mountain.[20] This is how Petrarch evokes the myth in sonnet 197 of his *Canzoniere*, in one of his numerous analogies between the power of Laura and that of Gorgo: *"pò quello in me che nel gran vecchio mauro, / Medusa quando in selce transformollo"* [has power like Medusa's when the old and famous Moor she transformed into rock] (ll. 5-6).[21] Many important exegetes have grappled with the myth of Medusa, singling out as a key problem the "the power of the gaze and the capacity of representation to control it."[22] According to Jean-Pierre Vernant, the Medusa and the spectator engage in a biunivocal relationship, a "crossing of gazes."[23] As Hal Foster glosses: "we project the power of our gaze onto her gaze, as her gaze, where it becomes other—intense, confused, wild—and subjugates our gaze in turn."[24] A gaze of fascination that in his reflections on alterity, Jacques Derrida describes in these terms:

> *fascination:* fixed attention of the gaze transfixed, as if petrified [*médusé*] by something that, without being simply a visible object, looks at you, already concerns you, understands you, and orders you to continue to observe, to respond, to make yourself responsible for the gaze that gazes at you and calls you beyond the visible: neither perception nor hallucination.[25]

In Freud's reading, the decapitated Medusa embodies the fear of castration, but petrification simultaneously represents, in its correlation with the erect phallus, the reassurance of preserved virility face to the feminine threat posed by the snake-haired monster. In this vein, Freud sees Medusa as the "originary fetish, both a 'memorial' to castration and a 'protection' against it."[26]

If we apply these categories to our situation, the Moor presents himself as the threatening Other, coming from territories situated outside of the Christian *oikumene*[27] and yet dangerously contiguous, threatening to make spoils of Venice riches. Venice as Medusa petrifies the preying Moor, keeping him in the form of a fetish as a reminder of his sacrilege and as a shield against future aggressions. But the Moor *regards* us, his gaze reveals ourselves, our own anxieties, our own crimes. Do these folktales harbor unwittingly the dark side of a civilization that has too often petrified its others in comfortable and reassuring stereotypes? With the same mechanism of projection operating in the colonial and imperial discourse, where the invasion and occupation of foreign lands is justified as a defensive act?

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[15] *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

[16] See: Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., *The Medusa Reader* (New York-London: Routledge, 2003).

[17] Garber and Vickers, *Medusa*, 1.

[18] Pierre Brunel, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. xxxx. .

[19] Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 260.

[20] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 135.

[21] Francesco Petrarca, *Rime* (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1976), 362, 99; Petrarch, in trans. and ed. Mark Musa, *The Canzoniere, or Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 289.

[22] Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, 262.

[23] Cited in Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, 263.

[24] Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, 263.

[25] Jacques Derrida *Psyche. Inventions of the Other*, Volume II (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 71.

[26] Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, 272.

[27] See: John Gillies, *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

An alternative reading is provided by Hal Foster:

> more than a terror of castration, of lack or difference, might the Gorgon figure be a terror of a lack of difference, of a primal state in which all differences (sexual, semiotic, symbolic) are confounded or not yet established? But if this is the case—that is, if Medusa figures the horrific real as radical other to the symbolic order—then this very figuring is also a first move in the mitigation of this real, a primordial act of civilization.[28]

It is no paradox, then, if Othello will end up being the one desperate to turn Desdemona into a "fixed figure," not of scorn but of dead adoration. "Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on / And turn again" (4.1.253-254) says Othello of her transgressive nature, projecting onto his wife the same unpredictability and shapelessness that Roderigo had ascribed to him. She must be neutralized, but whereas in Cinthio's tale Disdemona is sandbagged and mangled to death, Shakespeare's Othello rejects the disfiguring gesture in favour of a petrifying act of smothering:

> Yet I'll not shed her blood,
> Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow
> And smooth as monumental alabaster (5.2.5)

With his murderous action, too often interpreted as the irruption of primitive violence through the veneer of civilization rather than as a distorted and extreme enactment of the principles of that same civilization, Othello redirects the xenophobia of which he was the target towards the female other. However, far from reinstating him in the Venetian symbolic horizon of restored honor, the uxoricide makes him fall back ruinously into the stereotype of the evil foreigner, as Emilia is quick to remind him: "Moor, she was chaste, she loved thee, cruel Moor" (5.2.247).

The myth of Medusa has been revisited several times to thematize gender, but it also lends itself to reflecting on ethnic difference. The gaze of the Venetian people, accustomed as they are to seeing their piazza teeming with people from every ethnic and religious grouping, petrifies the criminal Moor into the stereotype. This may betray the guilt of a civilization often bent on the acquisition, not always lawful, of foreign treasures: Venice has probably been less tolerant and multiethnic that his mythographers have claimed.

In one of his most often quoted passages, Primo Levi writes:

> We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority; we

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[28] Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, 265.

> are those who by their prefabrications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell us about it or have returned mute, but they are the "Muslims," the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.[29]

In a surprising superimposition of Jews and Muslims, about which revealing pages have been written by Giorgio Agamben and Gil Anidjar,[30] the extreme form of dehumanization is to be found in those deportees reduced to the condition of "non-men who march and labour in silence:[31] and defined in Auschwitz with the etymologically uncertain term *Muselmänner*."[32] After the massacre, Agamben remarks, not even the SS could bear the spectacle of their victims "that under no circumstances were they to be called 'corpses' or 'cadavers,' but rather simply *Figuren,* figures, dolls."[33] Can one hazard that these "fixed figures," petrified by the Nazi Gorgo that in turn cannot tolerate directing its gaze at them, is the extreme outcome of the process of stigmatization and demonization identified and dreaded by the Moor Othello?

> Auschwitz is the site of an experiment that remains unthought today, an experiment beyond life and death in which the Jew is transformed into a *Muselmann* and the human being into a non-human. And we will not understand what Auschwitz is if we do not first understand who or what the *Muselmann* is—if we do not learn to gaze with him upon the Gorgon. [34]

Agamben's reading has been criticized for its lack of historical perspective and its apodictic argument, but the emergence of this designation in Auschwitz, whatever its etymology, is in itself significant, since it reinforces the association between two religious outsiders of the Christian West and in turn with a dehumanized person.

Juxtaposed to Othello, the other Moors of Venice turn out to be complex and ambivalent artifacts, texts that deny us objective historical conclusions but also prove to be powerful storytelling machines. The Moors analyzed here *regard* us, they remain as fetishes of the memory of past iniquities/transgressions that stain the luminous myth of Venice and still carry ancient stories which are as marvelous and captivating as those that persuaded Brabantio to make of Othello a welcome guest at his aristocratic abode.

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[29] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1989), 83-4.

[30] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 41-86; Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[31] Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Touchstone, 1995), p. 96.

[32] One of the basic critiques of Agamben's hypothesis is based on the fact that the term was employed only in Auschwitz, that has itself become the paradigmatic camp.

[33] Agamben, *Remnants*, 51.

[34] Agamben, *Remnants*, 52. On the myth of Medusa and the representation of Shoah see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 164-80.

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