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The Better Story for Romans and Byzantinists?

Review essay of Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland. Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2019. 373 pp. – ISBN: 978-0-674-98651-0, and

Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality. Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages*. Princeton, New Jersey – London: Princeton University Press 2020. 288 pp., 58 illus. – ISBN: 978-0-691-17945-2

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It has become commonplace to claim that Byzantinists are out of touch with both the contemporary theoretical approaches and the concerns of their day and age. Still, it seems that at least on the topic of identities there is a race in the field to get up to speed, even as the global public sphere shows signs of reaching a saturation with identity debates. A skillfully nuanced *Introduction* to a recent collective volume *Identity and the Other in Byzantium* offers an insightful, up-to-date summary of both the theoretical debates and Byzantinist publications on the matter.[1] Two recent publications, dealing with questions of ethnicity on the one hand, and of sexuality, gender, and race on the other hand, programmatically ring a bell for uprooting paradigm shifts in the field. By looking at them in parallel, this essay aims at nurturing a wider space of respectful, rigorous, and fruitful debate in the field of Byzantine studies.

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[1] Durak & Jevtić 2019, 3–22.

Romanland and *Byzantine Intersectionality*, the two volumes under review, have many points in common. Both authors argue against the deep-seated paradigms of the field. They both call for critical reassessments of their subject matter and claim to offer evidence from the sources, working theoretical definitions, and model approaches to emulate. They analyze significant corpuses that cover centuries of Byzantine history, dismissing the importance of factual/fictional divide for the study of identities. They detect the colonial gaze, medieval or modern, cast upon the Romans, which they claim distorted or misinterpreted the historical record in different ways. They ask their colleagues to take the voices from the sources seriously when they affirm their own ethnicity or gender, respectively. They seek cures for elite and Constantinopolitan biases and contend to account for wide or neglected portions of medieval Roman society.

However, their differences are consequential and call for a careful scrutiny. They concern, above all, the contrasting answers to their shared methodological questions, which are bound to have even greater impact on the future of the field than the undoubtedly interesting results of their own inquiries. What can modern theory do for Byzantinists, and is there an advisable manner to use it? Is 'anachronism' a useful concept in this debate, is it revelatory or occlusive? Are cultures translatable across time and languages? What is identity, what does it do, and who makes the rules? Whom is history about and whom is it for? Is an absolute disciplinary consensus possible and something we should strive for?

After laying out the content of the two publications, I examine the fashion and the degree to which they execute their programmatic assertions, by focusing on three main points: treatment of the historical record, theoretical groundedness and methodological consistency, and intellectual and ethical ramifications of their respective approaches for groups and individuals from the past and the present. By way of conclusion, I give a short assessment of implications of the two approaches for the future of dialogue inside the field. In a reference to Dina Georgis's book *The Better Story* (2013), this essay stresses the risks of binary choices and the importance of nuance and polyphony in debates on Roman and medieval identities today.

Romanland. Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium is the second book in Anthony Kaldellis' announced iconoclast trilogy, set to convey a seemingly simple stance: Romans in the Middle Ages were both a dominant ethnicity and a nation in a monarchic republican nation-state. The focus of this volume is on ethnicity, inseparably bound to the notions of nation and Empire in the author's theoretical construction.[2]

In the *Preface*, the author defines empires as polities in which an ethnic minority rules over a multitude of other ethnic groups. He announces his book as the first "proper study of empire in the case of Byzantium" (x), that engages "critically and directly with ethnicity" (xi), by studying "identity through the claims and narratives made by the culture in question" (xiii) and providing "both working definitions and empirical evidence" (xiv).[3] He defends the use of the name 'Byzantium', only as recognizable disciplinary designation.

The book is divided into two parts. The first one, *Romans,* begins with the chapter *A History of Denial.* After initial 'snapshots' from sources and definitions, which I will come back to, the author dedicates the chapter to various ways in which the Byzantinists have denied Romans their Romanness. He suggests a sweeping genealogy of 'denialism', starting from the Holy Roman Emperor Louis II in 871, passing over French Enlightenment philosophers, the Crimean War, and Edward Gibbon, directly to the late-twentieth century (mostly British) historians. Modern Byzantinists are marked as unconscious epigones of the Western European colonial views on Byzantium, comparable to Edward Said's Orientalism.

The second chapter, *Roman Ethnicity*, offers a mixture of theoretical claims and examples from Byzantine texts where authors identify themselves or others as Romans or ethnic others. Kaldellis draws attention to what he defines as a dominant ethnicity (or nation) in *Romanía* by extracting a list of criteria (belief in common ancestry, history, common homeland, language, religion, cultural norms, an ethnonym, perception

[2] While the first part (Kaldelis 2015) focuses on republican ideas and practices in Byzantium, the third is set to reinterpret its institutional framework.

[3] Since this essay focuses on identities, I leave the questions of political governance of *Romanía* largely out of discussion.

of difference from outsiders, and an ideal of solidarity) (46–47). He documents who was included and who was excluded from thus-defined Roman ethnicity, before examining how the notion of ethnicity functioned in medieval Roman language and culture. He asserts that the Roman ethnicity was felt and asserted throughout, regardless of gender, class, occupation or geographical location. He sets out to prove that Roman ethnicity was not imposed by Constantinopolitan elite, and that the population of the Roman polity was largely not multiethnic. In the following chapter, he emphasizes the vernacular, bottom-up formation of the word *Romanía*, as well as 'patriotic feelings' expressed in medieval texts. He zooms into two of his aforementioned criteria of ethnicity – language and religion – and their treatment in these texts in relation to the Romanness of their authors and characters.

The second part, *Others*, contains four chapters. The first one, *Ethnic Assimilation*, looks at "ethnic extinction and Romanization in Byzantium" (124), focusing on the cases of the Khuramites and Slavs. The main argument is that 'foreign' ethnic groups were systematically assimilated, while their ethnonyms could continue to be used for rhetorical and political purposes. Similar to the chapter on 'Roman denialism', the one called *Armenian fallacy* is a critique of modern historians who overextended the attribution of Armenian ethnicity to an astonishing number of historical figures with little warrant from the original texts. The people who were tacitly or explicitly Romans, the author claims, were in large numbers designated as Armenians in the twentieth century, based on names, questionable family ties, and misinterpretation of toponyms – the process he labels as biological or racialized thinking.

In the last two chapters, the author asserts that *Romanía* did not have enough minority ethnic groups to *be* an empire according to his definition, around the year 930, while the Roman nation-state might have *had* an empire around the year 1064, after a significant territorial expansion and before any extensive assimilation. These conclusions are based on Kaldellis' catalogues of ethnicities in the provinces, in Constantinople, and in the army, respectively.

In his book *Byzantine Intersectionality. Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* Roland Betancourt sets out to "look at how stories

give us a glimpse into the intersectionality of identity in the medieval world, exploring how these various categories overlap with one another—not as distinct identities but as enmeshed conditions that radically alter the lives of figures, both real and imagined" (2). The meaning of the concept of identity is not explicitly defined, but can be deduced to mean both the sense of unity of an alterable subjectivity, being and acting in the world, and the subject's identification with a certain group, engendered through personal, social or institutional agency and perspective. The author puts a clear emphasis on the 'how', rather than the 'what' of identities.

The study begins with a story from the sources, the hagiographical narrative of Mary of Egypt (*Introduction*, 1–18). The author uses it to highlight how an overlap of chosen or assigned identities can leave an array of textual and visual traces upon a single figure from the historical record. It also serves as an illustration of an approach that the author will apply in five case studies that make up the book. The first chapter, *The Virgin's Consent* (19–57), follows the narratives of Annunciation and the interaction between virgin Mary and archangel Gabriel, in textual and visual sources from Late Antiquity to late Byzantium. It uses glimpses of rape narratives from homilies, hymns, historiography, ekphrasis and a *progymnasma* as points of comparison. The questions of sexual consent, conception, violation, virginity, and shame are systematically historicized, embodied, and contextualized in a dynamic Christian environment. Mary's consent becomes in turn a sign of distinction from both pagan women and Eve, a deflection of social shaming, something that can be tacitly assumed, and finally an important intellectual faculty and an essential element of Christian salvation, while both the psychic and the physical boundaries of her body are drawn and redrawn.

Slut-Shaming an Empress (59–88) gives an original reinterpretation of Prokopios' narrative of Theodora in his *Secret History*. Sketching "a process intended to shame and socially ostracize a person for their sexual actions, proclivities, or choices" (59), the author gives insight into how, in Prokopios' narrative, Theodora's sexuality crosses paths with her class, education, and non-elite origin in order to be transformed into an invective. But by tying it up to her acquired social privilege, this

narrative also gives insight into and array of contraception and abortion practices, available in different degrees and forms to elite and non-elite figures. Thus, the initial story of shame becomes an account not only of Theodora, but of specific bodies, diverse sexualities, medical knowledge, and social solidarities, which either voyeurism, or attempts of redemption usually obscure in modern historiography.

The following chapter, *Transgender Lives* (81–120) uses the notion of gender as a continuum of diverse forms of identity – felt, imposed, chosen, expressed, or embodied – to put three corpuses into a constellation: the hagiographies of persons whose sex was assigned female at birth, but who spent a part of their lives as (often eunuch) monks; the Byzantine reception of the account of the emperor Elagabalus' gender-affirming surgery; and excerpts from Michael Psellos' writings and other texts that suggest the existence and practice of gender-fluid and non-binary identities in Byzantium.

The chapter *Queer Sensations* (121–160) offers complexity, sensibility, and new meanings. Alongside a theoretical examination of the concept of queer – not only as a name for same-gender desire, but as an intersection of sexuality, love, and radical, utopian sociality that can open transtemporal deadlocks of categorization and belonging – the author presents an analysis of verbal and visual narratives clustered around the lives of transgender monks, the Doubting Thomas biblical scene, and monastic life in general. Refusing to either oversexualize or render 'respectable' the medieval subjectivities and relations, Betancourt contextualizes the way the same-gender desire "was a present reality, manifested both chastely and erotically, in monastic and broader religious life" (131), but was at the same time "only a small facet of […] queerness as a radical cohabitation" (160).

The final chapter, *The Ethiopian Eunuch* (161–204), starts with an interpretation of various visual representations (9th – 14th centuries) of the hagiographical narrative in which the Apostle Philip baptizes a eunuch from the entourage of the Ethiopian queen Candace. The author then expands the inquiry into other textual and visual narratives, looking both at the meaning attributed to diverse skin tones or colors, and at other types of "articulation and management of human differences" (178)

that might correspond to the modern conception of race without being identical to it in content. He stresses the importance of the intersection between gender, sexuality and race, before concluding that skin-color diversity was rather a culturally accepted norm in Byzantium, while racial difference might have been conceived along different lines. The *Epilogue* emphasizes the importance of the concept of intersectionality and argues against the common paradigm of center and periphery for the study of social dynamics and identities.

Using the Sources

In an interesting methodological approach, Kaldellis begins the first two chapters of *Romanland* with eight 'snapshots', that is eight translated and heavily commented excerpts from medieval Greek texts (two hagiographies, four historiographic works, and two governance treaties, 3–11, 38–42). These 'snapshots' are treated as diaphanous, representative, and generalizable, so much so that in two cases the names of the author and the text from which the content is drawn are not even mentioned. They are referred to throughout the book, allowing for other excerpts from the sources to be shorter and less contextualized when they appear. The texts are framed as speaking for themselves and telling us that the Romans were not only a self-conscious ethnic group *or* a nation, but that they were one hundred percent so, and that this was their autonomously dominant identity. A closer look at one of the 'snapshots' shows a more complex state of affairs.

This excerpt is taken from the seventh-century anonymous *Miracles of Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki*. Kaldellis tells a story of a group of (male?) Romans, who were captured and transported across the Danube by Avars, married non-Roman women, but kept a Roman identity by passing it on to their children for more than sixty years. Driven by their ethnic impulse and led by a chief appointed by the Avar *khagan* from their own ranks, they rebelled against the Avars, crossed the Danube back into *Romanía*, and were reintegrated into their ethnic or national community. The story is framed by references to the Egyptian captivity and the Exodus of the Jewish people. Kaldellis defines Roman identity

of the characters as the stuff of narrative (6–7). The story is evoked six more times in the study and used to establish the criteria of ethnicity and prove that Roman identity was not a Constantinopolitan, elite imposition. Kaldellis implies that the dispersal of the migrant Romans throughout *Romanía* is presented as a standard assimilation technique, ordered by the emperor as if by habit (145).

When we zoom in on, or out of, the 'snapshot', the picture is much more complex. It is unclear why the author translates "ancestral dwellings" (τῶν πατρίων τοποθεσιῶν),[4] the object of yearning of the Transdanubian Romans, as a singular "ancestral homeland", when the very next passage he quotes says that the people "longed to return to its ancestral cities" (7). The basic premise of the plot is not that the Romans returned to *Romanía* because they managed to stay Romans, but that they wanted to return to their cities (Constantinople, Thessaloniki, and cities in Thrace). Contrary to that urge, their chief wanted to keep them together in the vicinity of Thessaloniki, so that he could use them as military and political leverage over the emperor. The emperor lets them stay together at first, and forces the presumably Slavic tribe of the Drougoubites into an uneasy economic symbiosis with the newcomers. When the people started dispersing after all, the chief and his evil councilor feigned a dispute between them, in order for the councilor to be able to enter and take over Thessaloniki. From there, the two would join forces and try to launch a wider rebellion against the emperor, occupying the islands and Asia. Thessaloniki was saved by the intervention of saint Demetrios, who inspired an admiral sent from Constantinople to action, and the polity was preserved by the skimming chief's son, who betrayed the secret of the conspiracy to the emperor.[5]

The story is immensely rich in interpretative possibilities, including questions of identity. On the narrative level, it is fascinating how certain Odyssean elements were intertwined with the story of the Exodus. Even though the story is framed as a biblical homecoming, the author

[4] *Miracles of Saint Demetrius*, 228.13; The Greek edition and the French translation of this particular miracle by Paul Lemerle on pages 222–234.

[5] Ibid, 228.30–229.1.

implies that some of the people returning were not orthodox Christians.[6] The reader wonders how the people from Thessaloniki spoke, since the author says one of the immigrants knew our local (καθ' ἡμᾶς) language, as well as "the one of the Romans, Slavs and Bulgarians" (sic!).[7] The anxiety of having an armed force inside the city walls, as well as that of a civil war looms behind the text. Saint Demetrios is a religious figure, but also profoundly Thessalonican. The interplay of territorial (urban and regional), ethnic, tribal, religious, and political identities is as crucial for the story, as it is complex. While they pass the 'Roman impulse' down the generations, once in *Romanía*, the migrants use their agency to go to their old cities. The anonymous author refers to them as *Sirmians*, presumably because they spent sixty years living around the city of Sirmium, across the Danube. It is unclear if ethnonyms *Slavs* and *Drougoubites* should be read as synonymous, or if one is always considered as a subcategory of the other. The very title of this story designates Kouber and Mauros, the leaders of the rebellion against the *khagan* and the empreror, as *Bulgarians*, despite the 'Roman impulse' that brought them 'back' across the river. It would not be anachronistic to remember the identity struggle of the Anatolian refugees of the twentieth century, designated as Romans or Greeks in Turkey, and as Turks in their new Hellenic homeland. If there is a point to this story, it is that of intersectionality and complexity of identities, as well as of overlapping individual, collective, and institutional agencies that take part in their definition. A simple transition from Lemerle's "Greek race"[8] to Kaldellis' "Roman ethnicity or nation" does not seem to be able to account for that complexity, nor do the ethnic catalogues.

Betancourt also opens the *Byzantine Intersectionality* with a story from the sources, concerning Mary of Egypt (1–18). But the author's technique comes closer to a 'cartographic study' than a 'snapshot'. From zooming in on Mary's apparent mastectomy scars and gestures in visual representations, to zooming out to textual transmission and transformation of her hagiography and contemporaneous medical and legal lore,

[6] Ibid, 228.30–229.1.

[7] Ibid, 229.22.

[8] This is how the French Byzantinist rendered the *Roman genos*.

he gives ground for the use of the theoretical spatial metaphor of intersection. Mary stands in a very specific crossroads of gender, sexuality, class, occupation, geography, race, and religion. And while her agency in choosing or accepting any of these identities is both acknowledged and limited, all of these identities influence both her subjectivity and each other. Betancourt makes a strong point for examining them together. Furthermore, if the proposition that all historical and literary figures stand at intersections of different identities is generalized, Mary's particularity is still acknowledged.

When approaching his textual sources, Betancourt introduces the context of his excerpts, the history of the text, and its generic, social, cultural, and ritual environment. His perspective often branches out to adaptations and contemporaneous or diachronically parallel stories or practices in order to nuance his initial interpretations. He applies a similar approach to visual sources. The importance of bringing down the walls between philology, literary studies, history, and art history becomes particularly obvious in the interpretation of Nikoalos Mesarites' ekphrasis of the Holy Apostles. While some of the sources the author analyses have been in the spotlight for a long time, many of them are taken from the margins of Byzantinists' spheres of interest. The study has no pretentions to holism; thus, it is likely to inspire related inquiries into other periods, images, and texts it has knowingly left out.

Concepts, Methods, Theories

Romanland displays its author's seeming distaste for theory in general, which occasionally slips into simplification, irony, or mockery (28–9, 74), and a fusion of theoretical concepts in particular. Kaldellis rightly pleads for a critical and direct engagement with ethnicity. In his opposition to the racializing thinking of the twentieth century, he embraces one of the versions of a constructivist theory of ethnicity. Ethnic group (or nation) is defined as a socially constructed group with a common ethnonym, language, customs, laws and institutions, homeland, and sense of kinship, of solidarity and of difference from other ethnic groups, or at least some combination of these categories.

However, the way Kaldellis uses a theoretical concept, such as ethnicity (or nation), is by looking for correspondences between his definition of a concept and generalized beliefs held by medieval Roman authors. He interprets that correspondence as a proof of validity of the concept. He states, for example, that "Konstantinos' [VIII, M.V.] concept is equivalent to standard modern definitions of the nation" (8). Without nuanced interpretation, apart from being ahistorical, this kind of a circular approach creates paradoxical situations. A laudatory comment on Steven Runciman, which asserts that "for 1929, when the apparatus of the term "ethnicity" did not yet exist, Runciman's formulation of the distinction between ethnic background and nationality is not bad" (34), seems to imply that it was virtually impossible to understand the Romans for what they *really* were before the second half of the twentieth century.

Furthermore, the author does not systematically make a distinction between the concepts of an ethnic group and an ethnic identity. Ethnicity, the most common term in the book, appears to be closer to the meaning of ethnic identity, but the author explicitly claims that the Romans "were, and knew that they were, an ethnic group" (xiii), and the readers can rarely be sure which one of the two stances Kaldelis is trying to prove at any point in the book. This simple fusion absolves the author from proving the status of an ethnic (or national) group as a real thing in the world,[9] and allows him to generalize the alleged phenomenon.

But it also presents us with a double danger. On the one hand, it obscures the essential character of diverse types of communities absent from the historical record, but tracible in the material one, such as communities of practice. It disregards warnings from both sociologists and archeologists against overstressing ethnicity – a warning that should prompt us to consider the role of the written sources and historians in ethnogenesis or nation building.[10] On the other hand, it introduces determinism into the picture, since the author seems to imply that there is only one predictable way a nation (or an ethnic group) can develop (14–15).

[9] There are different shades of opposition to this kind of approach from Barth (1969) to Brubaker (2002).

[10] Jones 2008; Carter & Fenton 2010; Steidl 2020.

Readers might also find the casual fusion of distinct conceptual couplets – ethnic group/nation, ethnicity/nationality, patriotism/nationalism – confusing. Romans were, according to this position, an ethnic group and/or a nation. Although the author gives a list of theoretical or applied works in the notes and bibliography, this specific position seems to be original. The works referenced to support the conflation of ethnic and national identities either say that this practice is possible, but should be resisted;[11] or argue against rigid distinction and amalgamation, but assert that one phenomenon develops out of or replaces the other;[12] or argue for studying ethnicity and nation under the same domain, but not as a same category, while stressing they are epistemological and not ontological categories[13] – a clear contrast to this book's position (47). This claim seems to raise more questions than it answers. Where else, apart from Byzantium, were ethnicity and nationality the same thing? What were conditions for this fusion? Why should we need to retain two terms that cover the same semantic field? And since the terms are used as almost synonyms, what could the term "ethnic nation" (48) mean? Does nation imply nationalism, or does national discourse construct the nation?

Pointing out this confusion is not a simple "theoretical squeamishness" (95). It has clear consequences for the interpretation of the sources, as seen in the example from the *Miracles of Saint Demetrios.* Similarly, this approach allows the author to compare phenomena across space and time without always corroborating that they are indeed comparable. The terms 'Arab' and 'Muslim' are both used as ethnonyms, either as synonymous, or with distinction, or in a compound way, without any explanation or indication if they should be seen as ethnic, national or religious. Another unexplained fact is that certain parts of the Slavic ethnic groups are systematically referred to in the Roman sources by their tribal names (e.g., *Milengoi*), but the analyzed category in the book remains 'the Slavs'. The study reports the occurrences of the Roman ethnonym in non-Greek sources, but the Roman ethnicity or nationality seems to exist and endure in a vacuum, with the only possibility of inter-

[11] Spira 2002.

[12] Pohl 2013, 19–20.

[13] Brubaker, Loveman & Stamatov 2004, 45–49.

action with other ethnicities being for the Romans to engulf them once the former enter their territory.

The author summarily criticizes the 'modernist' theorists of nations – the notion that nations appear only in modernity – with no reference to either their works or their critics (48, n.25), but it would be interesting to see his view of Roman identity confronted with that of one of the most influential anti-modernists, Caspar Hirschi, since it is diametrically opposed and thematically close to his own. Hirschi postulates the emergence of nations and nationalisms out of a temporally specific contradictions of frustrated Roman imperialism and the political fragmentation of late medieval Western Europe, and sees external multipolarity and interaction as its constitutive element. He stresses the role of intellectuals and historians in this process.[14] Since its publication, this position gained a wide dissemination in Medieval studies. Although theoretically sound and well documented, Hirschi's discussion unsurprisingly does not feature Byzantium. Testing the notion of multipolarity of nations could take the study of Romanness out of the aforementioned vacuum. But while it seems that Kaldellis ultimately aims at making Byzantine studies accessible and attractive to non-Byzantinists, his text remains overinvested in a fierce intradisciplinary intellectual dispute against a theorized, modernist, materialist, Constantinopolitan, ideological, top-down notion of Romanness.[15] Consequently, oversimplified, binary, mutually-exclusive alternatives are set before Byzantinists who might consider investigating these issues.

The final loose concept is that of "denialism", which is framed as a type of Orientalism à la Edward Said or even colonialism, concocted in the West, extending over a millennium, and directed towards Byzantium. Denying the 'realness', however defined, of the Roman identity of either the polity or the people in question makes no sense at all today. However, no evidence is offered of institutions, texts, images, or objects that could have served as vehicles transporting the Western bias from the ninth to the twentieth century, from kings to historians, in an unbroken line from Louis II to Averil Cameron. Existing literature on colonialism,

[14] Hirschi (2012).

[15] Stouraitis 2014; 2017. Scare quotes could be added to some of these qualifications.

Orientalism and reception history in the Byzantine context is equally absent.[16] While this study's claim might well be accurate, this question deserves much more dedication and nuance.

Romanland rages against the unquestioned dogmas in the field, and rightly so. As such, it can inspire intellectual bravery in young scholars and attract future Byzantinists. Many enticements and conclusions in this volume are sound and worthy of attention: the need to critically reassess ethnicity and political organization, the place of religion in Byzantine society, the Constantinopolitan elite biases and the role of colonial practices in knowledge-making processes. However, for its lack of theoretical clarity and consistency, the book does not always live up to the standards it sets for itself.

Byzantine Intersectionality seems to acknowledge that concepts change and interact when traveling between different contexts, discourses, and periods, while addressing the issue of anachronism head-on. As Betancourt puts it:

> The problem here is less the possible inaccuracy or anachronistic use of the term "transgender" in a premodern context; rather the danger lies in the modern assumptions about a binary gender system and a conflation of sex and gender that the terms "transvestite nuns" and the like imply (90).

The author introduces the readers with care into what might seem to be a niche theoretical realm. While defining and modifying the concepts he employs – sexuality, gender, race, trans, non-binarity, queer, slut shaming – he simultaneously argues against their marginality. The central theoretical concept Betancourt uses – intersectionality – has been travelling between academic disciplines and activist discourses for more than three decades.[17] It sprang from the recognition that women of color in the United States found themselves in a social position, including

[16] Cameron (2003) was the first to examine the applicability of Orientalism and postcolonial theory in Byzantine Studies. See also Auzépy (ed.) 2003; Nilsson & Stephenson (eds) 2014; Betancourt & Taroutina (eds) 2015; Marciniak & Smythe (eds.) 2016; Marciniak 2018; Alshanskaya, Gietzen & Hadjiafxenti (eds) 2018.

[17] Crenshaw 1991.

particular social invisibility and oppression, whose cause could not be reduced solely to either their racial or their gender identity, but was a specific amalgam of the two. Over the years, the term failed to become a unified, policed, hegemonic concept, remaining instead more of a nodal point, than a closed system, "a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities."[18]

It is this tool that allows the author not to banalize or shy away from messy and complex subjectivities. He does not normalize the strangeness of the information found in the sources; he does not try to establish whether a figure was more female, or less Christian, more socially privileged or less Ethiopian; he does not affirm the masculinity of the Romans to balance out the feminizing colonial gaze of the medieval Western Europeans, nor stress the empresses' charitable works to make up for her alleged sexual voracity. His approach is as queer as his objects of study, and the subjects he interprets are as byzantine as they are Byzantine and Roman. Betancourt is adamant and explicit about it: "Future scholarship must acknowledge that marginalization, oppression, and intersectionality are not modern constructs – they are methodologies. Even if such self-critical language is missing from our primary sources, we cannot state that the lived realities and experience of these subjectivities are not historically valid or present" (207). Indeed, it seems that the communication between categories of identity that ensue from such an approach is what allows the researcher to get the most of each individual category, as in the case of noting that the skin tone was more consequential for gender, than it was for race in Byzantium. Finally, it should be noted that intersectionality was first introduced into the Byzantine studies by Adam Goldwyn, and his observations on intersections between human and non-human realms of the past and the links between academia and activism remain one of the most promising avenues for taking this approach further, in conversations on identities and beyond.[19]

[18] Sumi, Crenshaw & McCall 2013. For the heuristic potential of the concept, see Hill Collins 2019, 34–41.

[19] Goldwyn 2018, 7–19.

Betancourt's study is bound to raise both questions and objections. It dedicates noticeably more space to gender and sexuality than to race (or class). Possible reason for that might be the fact that he has a much longer history of women, gender and sexuality studies in Byzantium to build upon. He not only cites but engages with works of Laiou, Talbot, Galatariotou, James, Smythe, Brubaker, Messis, Constantinou, Tougher and Neville, to name just a few.[20] Still, he diverges from them, or takes their findings further, in two important regards. He goes past the divide between positivist, reconstructionist history and textual, visual, or material semiotics. He also deconstructs the conventional binary (or tripolar) categories of gender and sexuality and tries to look between and beyond.

Readers reticent to interpret religious feelings and expressions as historical, socially conditioned, and embodied practices and phenomena might not be ready to accept his discussion of the Virgin's consent or the physicality of apostolic or monastic interactions, despite of all of the medieval images and texts involved. Similarly, scholars who do not accept the full implications of the notion of performative gender – that is, both the unfoundedness of the natural sex/cultural gender divide, and by consequence the non-binarity of gender – might have a hard time agreeing with the conclusions on Byzantine transgender monks.[21] Thinking of 'trans' not as a motion from one to another, and conceiving of it rather as a motion beyond the notional binarity, might be a useful approach for the reader who is trying to understand the voices and identities of these particular persons. It is also the reason why the author does not need to define Byzantine eunuchism as a 'third gender', for example. Moreover, since the eunuchs are not a central object of his analysis, the framework he constructs leaves a space for researchers to account for traits he does not dwell on.

Lastly, it seems improbable that a multitude of Byzantinists will outright accept the pronouns *they/them* when referring to Michael Psellos, despite indications that this author conceived of gender in general and,

[20] See the regularly updated and rapidly growing *Dumbarton Oaks Bibliography on Gender in Byzantium*: https://www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/resources/gender-bibliography.

[21] See now also Spencer-Hall & Gutt (eds) 2021.

at times, of his own gender, as being fluid and non-binary. However, more important than any unanimous consensus among Byzantinist at this moment in history, is the possibility to think what has thus far been unthinkable in Byzantine studies, due to modern conceptual constraints and disciplinary traditions. Betancourt's text creates a possibility of speaking, in English, of a Byzantine person of non-binary gender, or about whose gender we would prefer not to speculate. This possibility is unmistakably political and important for a number of modern history writers and readers. But instead of focusing on the conservative backlash it is bound to provoke, I propose we should open a serious discussion about what it can and cannot do. How would this debate be translated into Romance or Slavic languages, which are grammatically gendered beyond the third person pronoun and still do not have easily available tools to frame it, or into grammatically genderless languages as Armenian, Georgian, or Turkish. What would it mean for the speakers of these languages, their identities and histories? Accepting a degree of untranslatability of any culture could, in my opinion, stimulate insightful debates, not stifle them.[22]

Certain assertions in the book could be finetuned. The story of Abba Moses the Ethiopian might have offered further interpretative possibilities if his class or socio-economic identity before ordination – that of a violent outlaw and brigand – had been taken into consideration (184–5). Even though the author takes class identity or social position into consideration when analyzing Byzantine figures, the theoretical toolbox and vocabulary of this social aspect seems to be much less developed and nuanced than those of the three domains from the title of the book – sexuality, gender, and race. Furthermore, the idea that "Byzantine writers were clearly proud of the ethnic and racial diversity of the empire, its subjects, and the citizens of Constantinople" (173) needs either further temporal and spatial contextualization, or some additional nuancing to account for instances of ethnic intolerance and violence in some of the texts. However, Betancourt puts a strong emphasis on the open-ended and transitional character of his findings. Thus, to those who might want

[22] Castaño 2019.

to say that the Byzantines could not have *really* been what this book claims, the study seems to respond that the Byzantines were *also* all that. This open-endedness is not accidental. It comes with his choice of theoretical tools.

Filling in the Gaps

Do historians have a sort of an ethical responsibility towards the unreachable persons from the past and their widely and diversely conceived readership? Kaldellis' study is syncopated by invectives of unjustly denying a historical community their ethnic identity. Still, he argues for a Roman ethnic (or national) identity that is absolutely hegemonic. Not only is it present throughout the society and territory of *Romanía* (maybe excluding the slaves), not only does it flawlessly assimilate all other ethnic identities, but it also presents itself as the most important identity to each and every Roman, making other identities either into criteria of the ethnic identity (such as religious identity), or into completely independent and irrelevant phenomena (territorial, occupational, class, and gender identities).

I can only agree with the author when he argues against the oversaturation of Byzantine studies with references to Christian/Orthodox aspects of Roman society, but it remains underexplained why a religious identity must be a function of an ethnic one, and not vice-versa.[23] The hierarchy and different levels of porousness between these categories are untheorized. The author writes, interpreting a thirteenth-century chronicle:

> Each pair, in its complementarity, is meant to convey the sense of everyone: «Urban and rural, slave and free, noble and common, ethnikos and Roman, poor and rich, worthy and unworthy, and every person of whatever station in life.» The pairing of Roman and ethnikos as an exclusive complementary pair means that «Roman» encom-

[23] Nuance added in Kaldellis 2020.

> passed both rural and urban Romans, rich and poor Romans, and so on (66–67).[24]

The reader might fail to understand why the combinations Roman and slave, or rural and ethnikos are theoretically less probable, real, or visible, that is, why ethnic pair should be interpreted as superordinate in this paratactic string.

Kaldellis subsumes all identities under ethnic/national identity, explicitly claiming that all categories of individuals subscribed to it, regardless of the presence or absence of those individuals in the historical record. Furthermore, he supplies evidence from the sources against the argument that the over-represented Constantinopolitan elite generated Roman identity for or imposed it on the systematically silenced majority.[25] However,

> [d]espite nationalisms' ideological investment in the idea of popular unity, nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender difference. No nation in the world gives women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state.[26]

Interestingly enough, the excerpts that Kaldellis uses to affirm that women, about a half of the population of *Romanía* at any moment of its history, were and saw themselves as Romans include: a thousand Roman women to be married to the Khurramite immigrants; some women that "certainly" expected their Persian husbands to convert to Christianity; Roman women raped by Armenian soldiers; some Rum women enslaved by the Arabs; some women who were "obviously" implied, if not mentioned, in Manuel Komnenos' alleged conception of *Panromaion* as an extended kin;[27] and some Romans assumed to be women

[24] Conjunctions between categories are added in translation.

[25] A meaningful argument, diligently addressed by Krallis 2018.

[26] McClintock 1993, 61.

[27] Notice the essentialization of both kinship and ethnicity in this example. The logic seems to be that since both of these social groups reproduce through time, the membership of women in them is an assumed biological necessity and does not need to be mentioned. For a nuanced recent examination of the role of women in the Byzantine *genos* see Leidholm 2019, 106–109.

because they were textile workers (56, 76, 128, 249). It is also assumed that women were crucial for the transmission of ethnicity, even though, in the only overt case that we saw, the *Miracles of Saint Demetrios* depicted it as a practice undertaken by fathers (164). If this is a list of instances where gender and ethnic identity overlapped for Roman women in the historical record, can we still claim the universality of the ethnic experience across categories? Is this an anomaly of the sources, or an inherent characteristic of the category observed?[28]

It is noteworthy that juridical and commercial documents, as well as poetry and epistolography, from which fragments of historical female voices could possibly be extracted, are absent from the bibliography. Could the reason for this be their lack of interest in ethnic or national identification? I am not claiming that gender identity trumps ethnic identity or that ethnicity did not matter for women, but that the two are best observed in intersections and without any assumption based on an inferred and abstract universal subject, or omnipresent community. The 'realness' of the intersection is specifically recorded and remarked by the author in one case. The intersection of two ethnic or religious identities (Roman and Jewish) with the female gender identity, allowed the Roman Jewish women to initiate divorce proceedings and maintain some sort of economic independence (211).

It is through cases like this that the *Byzantine Intersectionality* helps us realize that not only marginal figures, but even the most elite and visible ones, like Theodora, stood at specific intersections of diverse categories of identity. Staying attentive to how both privilege and oppression shape historical records, Betancourt borrows the post-colonial concept of "reading without a trace" from Anjali Arondekar, and applies "recuperative hermeneutics of accessing minoritized lives and historiographies" (16). Furthermore, his focus on textual and visual traces of bodies and embodied practices, as well as his emphasis on how diverse identities were 'stamped' upon or into bodies (7, 102, 110–114), make the individual subjects in his book appear more 'real' than do the disembodied collective beliefs and consciousness usually encountered in

[28] Cf. Kinloch 2020, and Vilimonović 2020.

studies of Byzantine identities. It is also considerate of the diversity of its readers, and does not hide its political and community building impulses.

Finding oneself at the intersection of multiple identities of the same or diverse categories is different from having fluid identities. Mockingly attacking this latter concept, Kaldellis writes:

> One can allegedly wake up in a Serbian household, play the Greek in the marketplace in the morning, then switch to an Albanian persona at a wedding in the evening, pray at a Muslim shrine, and correspond with Jewish relatives at night […] They are a misleading and even fictional basis for studying historical ethnicities, which are not that easy to perform in a native way. Most people can manage only one in a convincing way, two at most. Truly "fluid" people are extremely rare (2019, 272–273).

A humorous response to this observation could be that it would be as tiring and challenging to do all those things in a single day for a single person, while constantly being a Roman. A more serious one would notice the practice of either "boundary work", or "boundary maintenance" in this remark. This kind of reasoning goes more with the process of ethnogenesis than with that of ethnic analysis.[29] It ironically proves the Kaldellis' point that writing on ethnicity in particular, and identity in general, is inherently political (273). Checks and balances for this sensitive process should not be provided by a common-sense mirage of objectivity, but by theoretical clarity and ethical responsibility.

Thus, when explaining the transition from racial to national and ethnic theories in the twentieth century, Kaldellis states that the 'West' with its heritage of racism, genocide and colonialism, should refrain from policing the "parochial nationalism of Balkan, Turkish, and Caucasian views of history." While their national institutions naturalize the temporal continuity of these groups today, the "Romans of Byzantium lack that advantage *and* face the sanctions of denialism" (46, author's emphasis). There is something more problematic here than deterministical-

[29] Brubaker 2016, 31–39; Barth 1969, 15–16; Jenkins 2008, 13–14.

ly extending the alternative or hypothetical history of the Roman nation into modern era.

In the course of the twentieth century, the alleged representatives[30] of at least three ethnic groups or nations from the cited territory conducted one or multiple genocides, while the term 'ethnic cleansing' was invented to describe their actions.[31] The perpetrators of such crimes that happened during my own lifetime and in my name, actively used medievalisms and projected their notions of national and ethnic groups onto the medieval history to justify their actions, often with the direct aid of national institutions and historians. Caution with the use of the term 'advantage', as well as the insistence on nuance and intersectionality when discussing identities (especially of the ones who are muted in this discussion) has to be inherently political, because the concept itself is.

The parallel reading of Kaldellis' and Betancourt's monographs resonates strongly with the critique of cultural artefacts presented in Dina Georgis' book *The Better Story. Queer Affects from the Middle East*. This anthropologist tries to interpret diverse aesthetic expressions of contemporary postcolonial identities. Relying on psychoanalytic, feminist and postcolonial theory, she defines her queer not as identity, but as affect.[32] She defines queer affects as sites and moments of vulnerability or trauma that linger, that have "no place in the social symbolic" and thus "threaten the logic of community, collective thinking and their narratives". Even so, and as such, her "queer affects" tell us as much about the subjects that experience them, as about the identities that those subjects refused or could not access. She focuses not only on the voiceless subaltern that are absent from the historical record, but also on the postcolonial voices that refused or were rejected from both the colonial identities and the anti-colonial hyper-masculine national allegiances. Her subjects are not

[30] Brubaker 2002, 163–189.

[31] It is worth noting that in a "Personal postscript" to the *Armenian fallacy* chapter Kaldellis both avoids using the term genocide and seems to classify it as something one might react to only emotionally, not intellectually, something to keep out of the main body of the study (2019, 195). Thus, the opportunities to both study the affect in the process of ethnogenesis and to engage with intellectual consequences of post-genocidal societies are lost.

[32] It should not be confused with the queer sociality in Betancourt's study.

'either/or', but 'neither/nor' and 'both/and'. Vulnerability is inherent in subjectivity, according to Georgis, because individuals rely on others to narrate their selfhoods. She reveals the "postcolonialities that are monstrous to the stable narratives of postcolonial resistance and heroism", and they teach her "that we are not obligated to live by the stories that no longer help us live well".[33]

The Romans that we, as Byzantinists, encounter now seem to have been at different times assimilating colonizers and victims of colonial-like violence. On top of that, a significant number of them have suffered different kinds of textual violence, whether they are present in the sources or not. Both Byzantinists and Romans need the better story. Certainly, Romans need to be acknowledged as Romans, their political organization needs a serious scrutiny, and provincial, non-elite identities need to be studied with care. But doing this without theoretical, interpretative, and ethical rigor and care exposes us to a risk of supplanting one denial with another. When identity is at stake, the choice is not between the Byzantines and Romans, or elite Romans and non-elite Byzantines, or Romans and non-Romans: the choice is between complexity and silence. Studying identity without intersectionality today, or treating this concept as a marginal gimmick, would be like throwing out the baby and keeping the bath water. To rephrase Kimberlé Crenshaw's echoing of Anna Julia Cooper – when transgender monks enter, all Romans enter.[34]

[33] Georgis 2013, 15, 22, 26.

[34] Crenshaw 1989, 160–167.

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