



**Rothman, E. Natalie. Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul**

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Volume 35, Number 3, Summer 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105797ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i3.19539>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Marino, J. (2012). Review of [Rothman, E. Natalie. Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 35(3), 151–154.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i3.19539>

the text of the translation is copiously annotated. The volume contains a rich bibliography and a ten-page index.

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**Rothman, E. Natalie.**

***Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul.***

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012. Pp. xx, 350 + 9 ill. ISBN 978-0-8014-4907-9 (hardcover) \$45.

Natalie Rothman's *Brokering Empire* is an extraordinary, path-breaking book. Steeped in archival sources and critical social and cultural theory, it both reveals and explains the role of culture brokers, middlemen minorities, and colonial intermediaries in defining linguistic, religious, and geopolitical boundaries across the Venetian-Ottoman field of power in the early modern Mediterranean world. Rothman calls the protagonists in her story "trans-imperial subjects" — "émigrés from Venetian colonies and borderland regions, redeemed slaves returning from the Ottoman Empire, converts from Islam or Judaism, and merchants and diplomats who regularly traveled across the Venetian-Ottoman frontier" (3) — a neologism for an intermediary category between citizen and foreigner, for those whose relationships between themselves and government institutions defined inclusion and exclusion in Venice, its colonies, and beyond. Trained as a historical anthropologist, Rothman makes theory out of practice as she explores complex networks of alliance and interest through interregional contacts, hierarchies of authority established by legal institutions and the patrician social order, and modes of interaction between the various groups and individuals in her empirical analysis of personal relations that cut across and redefined categories of foreign and local, Muslim and Christian, Turk and Venetian, Levantine and European, and East and West.

Setting is significant here, as Rothman explodes the myths of conflict and the clash of civilizations as well as the place of aristocratic paternalism and citizenship in Venice during the period between two wars, 1571–1669, after the Battle of Lepanto during the War of Cyprus and at the end of the

War of Crete. During this century, relations between Venice and Istanbul were distinguished by continued political and economic negotiations and the development of new diplomatic institutions to mitigate disputes. In the same way, the myth of separate public and private spheres is debunked as the venues of interactions among the trans-imperial subjects, local elites, and Venetian and Ottoman state institutions blurred this distinction. As much as public spaces such as marketplaces, courtrooms, and halls of government provided scope for exchange, so too composite “patrimonial households” combined domestic, business, and bureaucratic functions, which crossed juridical, ethnolinguistic, religious, gender, estate, age, and professional boundaries. The associational life in the realms of embassy compounds, brokers’ households, patrician palaces, the “Turkish” Exchange House, and the Holy House of Catechumens allowed for the consolidation and contestation of power — and provided sites for the circulation of knowledge; the negotiation not only of commercial and diplomatic affairs but also, through the questioning and confirmation of identities, of race, religion, and citizenship; and the emergence of a new kind of public.

In Part I, “Mediation,” Rothman examines petitions for the status of commercial broker, made to the Venetian Senate, to see how trans-imperial subjects (converts, returnees from Ottoman captivity, and Jews, Armenians, and Greeks, who were engaged in trade) acted as supplicants. Similarly, she studies the transcripts of trials of unlicensed brokers by the tribunals of the commercial brokers’ guild to show how the concept of foreignness was able to operate between the state and the marketplace. Here she finds that neither juridical definitions nor ethnicity, but rather trans-imperial bonds of affect and patronage linked brokers and merchants in defining and mediating exchange between the Ottoman foreigner and the Venetian native.

In Part II, “Conversion,” Rothman traces how the juridical and commercial criteria defining the Venetian state’s approach to trans-imperial subjects gave way to a more marked identification of religious differences in the post-Tridentine period. Thus, Rothman explains how Muslim, Jewish, and Protestant converts to Christianity could exist in Venice in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century age of confessionalization by recounting converts’ life narratives and by studying the practices of the Holy House of Catechumens, the charitable institution established in 1557 for the conversion of Muslims and Jews. On the individual level, Venetian patrons supported

converts in Venice and beyond to the Venetian maritime colonies and the Ottoman frontier; and on the state institutional level, the seventeenth-century Venetian conflict with the papacy and the rivalry with the Ottomans made conversion a project of metropolitan subject-making, that is, the proper identity for new Venetian subjects.

In Part III, “Translation,” Rothman studies the petitions of professional diplomatic interpreters (*dragomen*) and official responses. As the Venetian state’s political-economic identity as a commercial power shifted to a territorial state in the 1630s, *dragomen* became institutionalized both in the Venetian *bailo*’s house in Istanbul and then in Venice itself. The normalization of these ethnolinguistic experts into the state bureaucracy made contact and exchange with the Ottomans a matter of routine commercial and diplomatic affairs.

In Part IV, “Articulation,” she follows all these trans-imperial subjects in action through their trans-imperial trajectories and social ties. Rothman uses Venetian tax legislation to identify those in need of translation skills, in order to reinforce the claims of bilingual brokers drawn from the ranks of converts, redeemed slaves, and trans-imperial subjects to act as intermediaries for non-Italian speaking Ottoman and Safavid merchants. This ethnolinguistic distinction gave rise to the shifting categories of “Turks” and “Levantines,” with the words here traced philologically and given new connotations through two petitioning campaigns over the taxation of “Levantine” merchandise and the forced relocation of Ottoman and Safavid Muslim merchants.

The result is an innovative explanation of how the complex multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious society of mobile early modern actors moved across and erased the boundaries separating the Venetian and Ottoman empires in easy exchange through the Mediterranean world. All this multi-cultural mixing in an economic entrepôt like Venice resulted from its large population, its diverse division of labour, and economies of scale that created the space for individuals who did not fit into established categories and pushed the boundaries of belonging in Venice. The analytical concept of trans-imperial subjects should make us see the Ottomans in comparative perspective, with Istanbul and Venice both nodes along mutually constituted networks of exchange. Furthermore, it should help us reject Eurocentric post-colonial assumptions about European expansion, and lead us to rethink early modern colonialism, citizenship, subjecthood, and social membership — so

that the simplistic oppositions of metropole and colony, self and other, and natural and artificial boundaries evaporate.

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