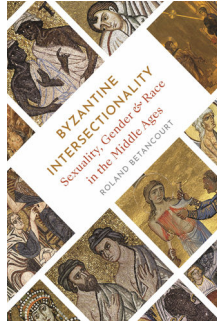


ROLAND BETANCOURT, *BYZANTINE INTERSECTIONALITY. SEXUALITY, GENDER & RACE IN THE MIDDLE AGES*

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Reviewed by
Karl Whittington

The study of gender and sexuality has a long and rich history in medieval studies. Beginning with feminist interventions in the study of medieval literature, and continuing with the emergence of queer studies in the 1990s and premodern critical race studies more recently, scholars of the Middle Ages have been major contributors to the critical project of helping women, queer people, and people of color see themselves in the premodern past. *Byzantine Intersectionality* is a part of this tradition but seeks to move the discourse in a new direction, in terms of both its area of study and its methodologies. Indeed, Betancourt's book is a significant part of what increasingly appears to be a real watershed moment in the field, appearing alongside Leah Devun's *The Shape of Sex. Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*, Greta Lafleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska's edited volume *Trans Historical. Gender Plurality before the Modern*, and Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt's edited volume *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, all published in 2021, and stretching back to Robert Mills's 2016 *Seeing*

Sodomy in the Middle Ages.¹ All of these books reject the more cautious approach to issues of terminology and premodern subjectivity that characterized much of the earlier work on medieval gender and sexuality. While each of these studies adopts different approaches and terms, to use just the example of transgender histories, all of these authors rebuff the frequent claim of anachronism and cautious use of outdated terms that have dominated the field, arguing instead that, in Betancourt's words, to deny the reality of premodern trans lives "is to be complicit with violence – both physical and rhetorical – not just in the past but also in the present" (p. 17).

Betancourt's method, as his title suggests, is not limited to particular issues of gender and sexuality, such as transgender studies or same-gender desire, but instead uses the framework and methodology of intersectionality to explore intertwined issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, consent, shame, and desire in Byzantium across a range of case studies. As is now well known, the concept of intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1998, "to stress that the lived realities of marginalized people do not exist as isolated factors alone but instead come together at the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, socioeconomic status, and so on" (p. 14). For Betancourt, intersectionality is not only a productive methodology for exploring premodern culture; it is also an explicit critique of much earlier scholarship in the field, such as works of queer studies that explored premodern homosexuality but ignored trans and nonbinary identities, or studies of Early Christian trans saints and monks that left out critical issues of race. *Byzantine Intersectionality* convincingly shows that evidence for these intersecting identities lies in plain sight in the primary sources, waiting to be uncovered by new generations of queer, trans, nonbinary, and scholars of color who are committed to new ways of writing history. These new histories often embrace or ignore rather than dance around the claim of anachronism. In a discussion with Betancourt in a recent podcast for the College Art Association, Bryan Keene, another important scholar and curator of these issues, makes the point that *all* contemporary histories are anachronistic and harness modern terminology to discuss the past.² Rejecting the use of terms like trans in discussions of premodernity, these authors claim, is inherently tied to the denial of such lives and subjectivities in the present. Thus, the politics of this book and the others mentioned above lie on rather than beneath the surface; as Betancourt writes, "our past must be intersectional before our future can ever be" (p. 208).

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Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex. Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*, New York 2021; Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska (eds.), *Trans Historical. Gender Plurality before the Modern*, Ithaca, NY 2021; and Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (eds.), *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, Amsterdam 2021; and Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages*, Chicago 2015.

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Roland Betancourt and Bryan Keene, In Raking Light, CAA Conversations Podcast, October 23 2020.

The terminologies and writing style of *Byzantine Intersectionality* make it clear that the book is intended for a wide audience; indeed, its publication was accompanied by a series of articles by the author in popular media such as *Time*, *The Washington Post*, *Scientific American*, and *The Conversation* that were clearly calibrated to invite new kinds of readers into this material. And Betancourt's decision to use twenty-first-century terminology is not limited to words like transgender, queer, intersex, and intersectionality. Throughout the book we read of women being "slut shamed", monks engaging in "hazing", people exploring "gender confirming surgery", individuals who suffer "intimate partner violence", and the "epidermal racism" of Early Christianity, among many other memorable turns of phrase. The use of terms like this will, and indeed already has caused controversy or discomfort, but I found it both refreshing and powerful. I would encourage those who might be uncomfortable at first with seeing such terms used to describe people living a millennium or more in the past to think about what it is that really bothers them about it. In using such terms, Betancourt only reveals what must be obvious once we reflect on it: of course things like hazing, slut shaming, or intimate partner violence have occurred for millennia. So why not call things what they are and by their current names?

But even while the book appeals broadly to readers outside of Byzantine historical and cultural studies, it is a deeply learned and well-researched contribution that clearly aims to address the field and chart potential future courses of study within it. Betancourt was trained as an art historian, but while there are a number of nuanced and compelling engagements with particular works of art, this is not primarily a book about images. Instead, the author makes his greatest contribution as a powerful reader of diverse primary texts (the book's bibliography of primary sources is nearly as long as that of the scholarly literature), including sermons, letters, saints' lives, medical and scientific treatises, biblical commentaries, hymns, and historical chronicles. In a series of engagements with these texts, some of which will be described below, the author shows his deep commitment to the concept of cultural discourse as a potential source of information about real lives. In the podcast episode mentioned above, released around the same time as the book, Betancourt spoke eloquently about the dangers of the trend in art history to believe that images can "speak for themselves". Images, Betancourt believes, do *not* speak for themselves, but rather are harnessed, weaponized, or championed within a network of other cultural products, and the stakes of the production and use of images must be investigated in tandem with the cultural discourses, fictions, lives, and worlds revealed in texts. The most powerful images in Betancourt's study are an image of Mary of Egypt from the Theodore Psalter in which Mary has a red line or scar drawn across her chest, a painting of the Doubting Thomas from the Chilandar Monastery at Mount Athos, and an illumination of Philip and an Ethiopian eunuch from the Menologion of Basil II. Each of

these fascinating works contains critical details and artistic choices of line, color, pose, and gesture whose significance and signification are only legible when placed into dialogue with primary sources through Betancourt's analysis.

Byzantine Intersectionality is organized around five chapters, each of which presents what Betancourt terms a "miniscule intersectional history" of a particular subject: reproductive consent, sexual shaming, trans and nonbinary genders, queer intimacies, and racial identity. This organization by topic is necessary, but the author's method of intersectionality is committed to cross-fertilization between and among these topics. Some chapters are organized around a key text or issue, while others find their point of entry through an image. Since my own expertise is in the intersection of art, science, and gender/sexuality in late-medieval Italy, France, and England, I am less qualified to judge all of the readings and citations of the specifically Byzantine historical material (largely drawn from fourth to eleventh-century sources), so I will focus on what I see as the contributions to the broader study of gender, sexuality, and race.

The first chapter, "The Virgin's Consent", is anchored in the book's most impressive close reading of a primary source: a homily on the Annunciation delivered by Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople in the mid-ninth century. This well-known text describes in meticulous detail the emotional reactions of Mary during the course of her interactions with the archangel Gabriel, a subject that often attracted commentary during the period but which in Photius's treatment is unusually psychological and personal. Betancourt places the timing and conditions of Mary's ultimate consent to her impregnation in Photius and other theologians' texts in dialogue with two other key bodies of discourse: numerous texts and images revealing legal and cultural ideas about consent and rape in Byzantium and a series of visual images of the Annunciation in which minute changes in pose, gesture, and iconography indicate artists' careful consideration of consent and its implications. In particular, Betancourt explores a lengthy series of images in a twelfth-century manuscript (Vatican Library Vat. gr. 1162) of the homilies of the monk James Kokkinobaphos, which "articulate Mary's fear and hesitation through an overwrought narrative and the continued repetition of Annunciation scenes until her final consent". Betancourt ultimately argues that "as issues of coercion and forced consent became crucial to Byzantine thinking about sexual and matrimonial relations in religious and legal spheres, the focus appears to have had a lasting impact on the narrative around the Annunciation", including in the visual arts (p. 57).

In the second chapter, "Slut Shaming an Empress", Betancourt re-reads another famous primary source, Procopius of Caesarea's sixth-century *Secret History*. This graphic and salacious text, the exact status and audience of which have long been debated (an issue Betancourt treats briefly at the end of the chapter), attacks the actions and character of the Emperor Justinian I and especially

the Empress Theodora. While other authors have situated the text more within the politics of the court in Constantinople and have doubted its reliability, Betancourt uses the text's references to Theodora's use of contraceptives and abortion to investigate the status of such practices among the city's upper classes. Through a range of medical sources, particularly, the author demonstrates the long history of abortifacients, contraceptives, and surgical abortions in the classical medical tradition and their afterlives in Byzantium, arguing that such practices hardly lay outside the norm among the upper classes and that even clerical authors sometimes viewed them as necessary. Thus, in Betancourt's reading of the text, Procopius publicly shames Theodora and other aristocratic women for actions that were common, raising the question of how this kind of shaming functioned rhetorically in period texts. What emerges is a complex discussion of how and where to read between the lines of this text for Theodora's complex subjectivity, and the use of sexual shaming as a cultural and political weapon.

The third chapter is in many ways the heart of the book. Here, in "Transgender Lives", the author zeroes in on a topic that reappears in many other chapters as well: the trans, especially transmasculine, saints and monks whose complex stories circulated widely throughout much of Byzantine history. Across dozens of individual stories, Betancourt paints a complex picture of sources that sometimes valorize and idealize these trans monks and other times strictly enforce binary gender codes. While many earlier scholars framed the lives of these trans monks in terms of a gender ascent, based in period sources that celebrate the shedding of inferior female attributes and the taking on of male ones, Betancourt demonstrates that at least some of them clearly identified as men. Previous studies often treated these figures' male identity or "cross dressing" as a "strategy" or "practical device", positions and terminologies that Betancourt argues work to deny these trans men the possibility of real male subjectivity (p. 98). But in addition to this convincing reframing of the material through a trans lens (something that important trans scholars such as Gabrielle M. W. Bychowski are also undertaking), Betancourt's analysis makes two other critical interventions about the potential lived experience of these figures and how we can use texts to glimpse their subjectivity.³ First, he explores the "transmasculine body of ascetic practice", a body that becomes male through the harsh lived realities of desert monasticism and that is distinctly racialized, with darkened skin a critical part of the narratives. Second, he excavates a series of primary source texts that point to the existence of gender affirming surgeries in both ancient and Byzantine contexts, many related to the third-century Roman emperor Elagabalus, discussed by Betancourt as a trans woman. How common such surgeries may have

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See, for example, M. W. Bychowski, *The Authentic Lives of Transgender Saints. Imago Dei and Imitatio Christi in the Life of Saint Marinos the Monk*, in: Spencer-Hall and Gutt (eds.), *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects*.

been remains unknowable, but references to their existence in texts are a meaningful addition to the discussion of monks like Marinos, Dorotheos, Pelagius, Anastasius, and others. The chapter concludes with the convincing observation that “to be a transgender man in early Byzantium would *not* have been a radical queer practice” (p. 120).

The encounter between Christ and Thomas after the Resurrection is the subject of Chapter 4, “Queer Sensation”. Here the author comes closest to writing a queer history in the model that has been established for several decades, but with significant differences. Again, in the ways that the encounter between Christ and Thomas is described across numerous texts and images, Betancourt finds numerous intersections between this queer encounter and Byzantine concepts about transgender identities. He also argues convincingly that a model of “same-gender desire” is more inclusive and correct than “same-sex desire”, and that we need to move past the pessimistic attitudes of much queer theory, embracing instead the model of queer utopias put forth by José Esteban Muñoz.⁴ In this reading, the encounter between Christ and Thomas is framed in texts and images within a realm of radical queer sociality amidst the other disciples, a “refuge amid likeness” that constituted a “queerness defined by world building” (pp. 159 and 160). The chapter concludes with a compelling analysis of the queer implications of sensory engagement and the “erotics of sensation” (p. 148).

The final chapter is perhaps the richest of the book, analyzing the image of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch from the Menologion of Basil II. The argument is too complex to be fully summarized here, but Betancourt weaves together aspects of race, ethnicity, and sexuality to demonstrate the range of meanings that this “Ethiopian” man could have held for the book’s audiences. Noting that he is depicted not as a foreign other but rather very much as a eunuch of Constantinople, the author weighs the range of Early Christian sources that denigrate “blackness” against Byzantine texts and images that unambiguously celebrate the empire’s multiculturalism and range of ethnicities. The image of the eunuch from the Menologion holds in productive tension these various strands, and in discussing it Betancourt comes the closest to a truly intersectional method practiced on a single image, demonstrating the gendered and sexualized implications of dark and light skin as they meet in the figure of the eunuch.

There is much in the book to debate, and some points that I disagree with, but I don’t find it productive here to point out the few instances where I might have arrived at slightly different conclusions from the author; I am too deeply sympathetic with his approach and treatment of these complex sources to nitpick. What is more interesting to reflect on, I think, is the way the author has positioned himself within the field and in relation to

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See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York 2009.

previous scholarship. When I first read the book there were some omissions that the author made that bothered me, but as I have had time to reflect on the book's contributions, I can better see what these choices may have allowed him to do. Seeing the term "Middle Ages" is in the book's title led me to expect more engagement with the large body of scholarship on gender and sexuality in medieval western Europe. And, indeed, the author has clearly read widely in this scholarship, which made certain omissions all the more clearly intentional. In the Epilogue, for example, Betancourt positions his book specifically as a retort to Michael Camille's *Image on the Edge*, a book which I still deeply admire but whose limitations and cis-normativity Betancourt now helps me to see. Yet there is no mention of Camille's numerous other publications on queer topics, which seem more germane to the present study than his book on marginalia. Initially I found myself thinking, how can we investigate medieval gender identities and the gender fluidity of Christ's body without Karma Lochrie's *Heterosyncrasies* or Caroline Walker Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption*?⁵ What about the contributions of Marina Warner, Margaret Miles, Madeline Caviness, Carolyn Dinshaw, Leslie Feinberg, and many other earlier feminist scholars of the Middle Ages, without whose work so many of these ideas would be unimaginable?⁶ Or Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset's pioneering book on medieval medicine and sexuality?⁷

I don't point out these omitted authors to discredit the author's research and expertise; I'm sure Betancourt has read these scholars. Rather, the omissions point to an interesting choice made in the book: to largely avoid relitigating the histories of these debates in previous scholarship. Their omission may even be, at times, an act of generosity by the author, whose work often points to the limitations of earlier studies, too few of which dealt with issues of race, for example; not mentioning these authors eliminates the need to directly critique them. While key moments in previous scholarship are sometimes introduced into the text, for the most part its pages remain engaged directly with primary rather than secondary sour-

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See Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies. Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't*, Minneapolis 2005; Lochrie, *Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies*, in: Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James Schultz (eds.), *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, Minneapolis 1997; and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York 1991.

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See, among many other works by these authors, Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex. The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, New York 1976; Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing. Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*, Boston 1989 (particularly the chapter "Becoming Male. Female Martyrs and Ascetics"); Madeline Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages. Sight, Spectacle, and the Scopic Economy*, Philadelphia 2001; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval. Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, Durham NC 1999; and Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors. Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*, Boston 1996.

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Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1988.

ces. These conscious omissions also indicate the degree to which the book is truly a study of *Byzantium*; the work of the authors mentioned above was largely developed in dialogue with western European sources, and Betancourt convincingly demonstrates that intersectionally investigating Byzantine material requires different terms, involves new stakes, and yields different kinds of histories.

Yet there remains something interesting here, which will have to be worked out in scholarship and classrooms for years to come: how to continue reading and engaging with pioneering earlier works in feminist and queer studies that still have much to contribute, even while some aspects of these texts no longer align with many of the terminologies, priorities, and politics of our present moment. Speaking for myself, I plan to continue teaching these texts, and I think Betancourt's book will be interesting to teach and read *alongside* Camille's work in queer art history, Lochrie's theories of medieval gender, or Warner's feminist reading of Mary. One can both appreciate and agree with many of Betancourt's conclusions while perhaps not dismissing the earlier scholarship so unambiguously. This small critique of the book is not an isolated issue for our field; it is part of the very structure of how queer communities and communities of color are wrestling with the histories of their own social movements and politics, particularly in their relationship to white feminism and the academy. Betancourt is right that intersectionality is urgently needed in the study of premodernity, and I have little doubt that, for example, a transgender or nonbinary student encountering his book in a class will prefer his treatment of the past to those of the feminist and queer scholars of the 1980s and '90s. This, in itself, is hugely important: people need to be seen and heard as new histories are written of their pasts. But Betancourt's book, when read and taught broadly, will hopefully be both a spark for future research along the lines he proposes but also an invitation to look back to earlier work.

Fields sometimes need fresh starts: direct engagements with works of art and texts that are not bound so tightly to the debates that have come before. This book (together with some of the others published the following year that I mentioned at the beginning) constitutes such a fresh start. Betancourt is not bound by the previous terms and debates of queer or feminist art histories, which frees his book to do what it does best: demonstrate the fascination of this material and the political urgency of studying it by seeing texts and images with fresh eyes. Beyond its appeal to a wide range of readers, the book has much to say to scholars of all kinds of medieval art and culture, western European or Byzantine. Kaleidoscopic rather than encyclopedic, field-opening rather than territorial, this important book will be instrumental in teaching and training new generations of scholars to look at their premodern material in dialogue with the present moment. I am deeply grateful to the author for the book and look forward to teaching it and engaging with it for years to come.