

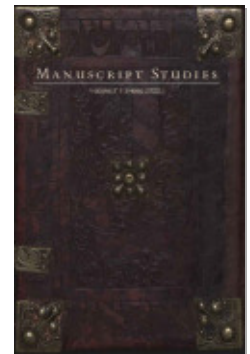


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*Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in
the Middle Ages* by Roland Betancourt (review)

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twenty years ago to be written in a language no one had ever seen, have fallen by the wayside (272). Lastly, the sherd is what Gippert calls “a classic self-revealing fake” (263). Fakes often reveal themselves because of what we might think of as over-invention, such as trying to create a new language or new alphabet, or in the case of the sherd, inscribing the item with modern letterforms (274). These self-revealing fakes also appear in several of the contributions in the first part of the collection. Finally, Michael Friedrich’s concluding chapter, “Producing and Identifying Forgeries of Chinese Manuscripts,” also treats the idea of what Gippert calls “the interplay of linguistics, philology, archaeology and ‘hard’ sciences,” this time in relation to unprovenanced bamboo-slip manuscripts held in Chinese state institutions (275). We find that trying to lay down rules or procedures for determining fakes is a tricky business since forgers have a variety of ways of creating their fakes, and what works to determine one type of fake will not necessarily work with another.

Since this collection is open source, it may be downloaded as a complete collection or as individual chapters. The collection is worth reading, but since the chapters range so very widely in time and place, it seems more likely readers will want to read only those chapters that are relevant to their own research. Nonetheless, all of the chapters bring up good questions about authenticity, means, and, perhaps most interestingly, reception of and motivations for creating fake written artifacts. This is a welcome addition to the Studies in Manuscript Cultures series.

Roland Betancourt. *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020. 288 pp., 8 color, 50 black and white ill. \$35. ISBN: 9780691179452.

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ROLAND BETANCOURT’S *BYZANTINE INTERSECTIONALITY: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* is a must-read for everyone in

medieval studies and a must-own for every library. This would be true even if the field were not experiencing a crisis of conscience right now regarding racism in scholarship and institutions and the racialization of the medieval world to support various white supremacist agendas. Betancourt's work is truly intersectional in the precise definition of the term: he addresses class, gender, sexuality, and other marginalized positions through the lens of critical race theory. And though his focus is specifically on the Byzantine world, defined by Betancourt as "a capacious term to encompass the span of the Greek-speaking Mediterranean, as well as the contributions to this world by its closest neighbors and allies," his work is fundamental to medieval studies holistically (15). For parties interested in manuscript studies, the book also features a treasure trove of images from various manuscripts, including a selection of color plates. Many of these works are from the Vatican Library. Greek texts are presented in careful translation, although specific words under discussion or those that provide support to a nuanced argument also appear in the original. And the range of manuscripts used is wide, including everything from bibles to chronicles to medical texts.

Chapter 1 tackles the thorny issue of consent and the Virgin Mary. The conception of Jesus is, of course, a central moment for Christianity. What does it say about the new religion if it is built upon rape? Betancourt explores Mary's non-consent as demonstrated in pre-iconoclastic materials, setting this discussion into a greater context of rape cases and rape laws as well as violence and objectification. The same language used to discuss, for example, women's encounters with invaders is at play in sermons about the Annunciation. This narrative shifts after iconoclasm to one of Mary's consent accompanied by pregnancy, and then further in later Byzantium to a focus on Mary's perceptual process as it contributes to conception. The Incarnation becomes explicitly timed to occur after Mary's consent and indeed almost at her will. The chapter closes with an examination of this theme of consent within the art of the period as well as theological materials, particularly the ninth-century *Sacra Parallela* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Par. gr. 923), the eleventh-century *Panegyrikon* (Mount Athos, Esphigmenou Monastery, Cod. 14), and the twelfth-century homilies of the monk James Kokkinobaphos (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1162).

Chapter 2, called “Slut-Shaming an Empress,” discusses contemporaneous accounts of Theodora as written by her detractors, particularly Procopius of Caesarea (sixth century). The title of this chapter as well as the focus of the previous one (consent) demonstrates Betancourt’s dedication to an immediate type of intersectionality by using twenty-first-century terminology in believable ways to discuss the past. Betancourt carefully unpacks the layers of rhetoric, artistic and literary depiction, and material circumstances surrounding Theodora to present an intersectional subject, saying, “the contours of her sexual acts articulate the intersectionality of her subjectivity” (62). In particular, Procopius’s depictions of Theodora as “counternatural”—a woman who seeks out and enjoys anal and oral sex alongside vaginal—mark her as monstrous and outside the elite. Further, these acts and her supposed vast knowledge of abortifacients mark her as a sex worker. This section is carefully supported by manuscript evidence from numerous contemporaneous medical texts. A failed abortion is then connected to a son conceived with a man from Arabia, a mark of difference Theodora cannot tolerate, forcing her to eliminate her own son. All these supposed sexual problems and overt shaming are important pieces in developing the narrative of Christian subjectivity; in Theodora’s case, they are used as political weapons to delegitimize her.

The next chapter focuses on transgender hagiographies. Once called the “transvestite saints,” Betancourt reevaluates these vitae in light of “how we might . . . understand what a transgender Byzantine identity might have looked like in the larger society” (89). For someone like me who has long used these hagiographies, especially those of Euphrosyne and Eugenia, in queer and gender classes, this chapter was a welcome aid in situating these largely literary figures in the greater cultural context. This is especially important because we do not have evidence that these people, if they even existed, identified with a particular gender identity. Yet their stories allow room for developing a vocabulary with which to discuss gender fluidity and eunuchs alongside monastic chastity and womanly virginity. Further present in this discussion is the specter of violence: these individuals are often accused of rape and forcibly revealed without consent, precursors to the violent outbursts against trans individuals

in our own time. Fascinatingly, Betancourt also examines the Byzantine version of gender confirmation surgery. This moves beyond what might be at least somewhat suspected—castration—noting the case of the emperor Elagabalus (218–222), who purportedly offered great wealth to any physician who could successfully provide him with a vagina. One minor criticism here is the exclusion of work by Eric Varner and Andrew G. Scott, both of whom described Elagabalus as an early transgender figure seeking a vaginoplasty. Nevertheless, Betancourt goes on to contextualize Byzantine attitudes toward body modification and transformation, as well as fleshing out the intersectionality angle with a nuanced reading of the emperor's foreign (Syrian) background. The chapter concludes with a brief foray into nonbinary identities.

Chapter 4 encompasses a broader approach to “queer sensations” by examining a range of homoerotic encounters within Byzantine literature, art, culture, and theological treatises. For instance, the mid-seventh-century *Heavenly Ladder* by John Climacus praises those who disrupt lustful tendencies among monks, while Cyril of Scythopolis's *Life* of the fifth-century monastic leader Euthymius reflects the founder's request to keep young brothers away from his cell to prevent temptation. The main examples, however, include women's sexual advances toward transgender monks, such as in the life of Eugenia, before they are revealed to have female bodies, and Doubting Thomas's penetration of Christ's side wound. This latter example is further connected to hymnology that explicitly links finger, penis, and Christ's permeable body. A prime example of this is a close reading of the *Protheoria*, a liturgical commentary from the late eleventh century. Judicious use of art, including murals from monasteries in Greece and illuminations in various psalters, such as the late ninth-century Chludov Psalter (Moscow, State Historical Museum, ГИМ gr. 129), the tenth-century Paris Psalter (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. gr. 139), and the Theodore Psalter from 1066 (London, British Library, Add. MS. 19352), illustrates this theoretical chapter.

Finally, chapter 5 focuses on Ethiopian eunuchs—or, rather, more specifically on a single Ethiopian eunuch depicted in the *Menologion* of Basil II (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1613). In this

case study approach, Betancourt demonstrates close reading of both word and image in support of an intersectional approach to the medieval. In this image, the Ethiopian eunuch is Black. This is, oddly enough, unusual—Betancourt explains that most depictions portray the eunuch as pale (white) with effeminate features and long hair. This negation of skin tone thus prioritizes the eunuch's status as eunuch rather than emphasizing their darkness. But in the *Menologion*, the eunuch is dark-skinned. Blackness is, unsurprisingly, connected to hypersexuality. This sin is then compounded by unnatural desire and temptation, and in other images, Ethiopians are sometimes relegated to becoming nameless demonic figures. The chapter continues through discussions of pigmentation, personification, and painting set against actual accounts of the events, such as the oration given by Eustathios of Thessaloniki in 1174 on the occasion of the Epiphany. This chapter, then serves as the culmination of the work Betancourt has done throughout the book to interweave the importance of race, class, and sexuality to the pre-modern world. While the idea of race in the modern sense may not have been explicitly articulated, clearly subjects were defined and proscribed by skin tone, bodily features, and geographical origin. As Betancourt notes: "the fact that the eunuch cannot simply be a black Ethiopian, cannot simply be a white eunuch, cannot simply be a persecuted early Christian, but must develop a new system of representation altogether drives the methodological goals of this volume, which has sought to articulate new structures of representation to bring out the intersectional identities of Byzantine studies" (202).

Having each chapter focus on discrete topics that are all connected through the larger framework of sexuality and intersectionality makes this book especially attractive for teaching in addition to scholarship. It will be convenient to include a chapter as a supplement to primary readings for courses in various medieval disciplines (art, art history, history, literature, and theology immediately come to mind) as well as gender studies classes. The deft combination of scholarly jargon, modern terminology, and historical rhetoric lends itself to both readability and usability. Overall, I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the pre-modern world.