Review of Roland Betancourt, Byzantine Intersectionality. Sexuality, Gender & Race in the Middle Ages

Stavroula Constantinou
Director, CeMAR, UCY (Cyprus)

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal

Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Art History at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

STAVROULA CONSTANTINOU
*Director, CeMAR, UCY (Cyprus)*

The term “intersectionality,” which features so prominently in the title of the book under review, was coined in 1989 by the legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in what is now a famous and highly cited article: “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” The term was invoked to explain the condemnation, erasure, and marginalization of Black women for their gender/sex, class, and race. Crenshaw’s concept would become so popular that it took a life of its own; as she emphatically points out in an interview: “my own use of the term ‘intersectionality’ was just a metaphor. I’m amazed at how it gets over- and underused; sometimes I can’t even recognize it in the literature anymore.”

Roland Betancourt’s recent book *Byzantine Intersectionality* is a prime example of such an unrecognizable use of Crenshaw’s concept. While Betancourt defines the term correctly (“intersectionality suggests that a foreign woman […] faces a series of challenges that include the struggles of those socially identified as being both foreign

---

1 Michele Tracy Berger and Kathleen Guidroz “A Conversation with Founding Scholars of Intersectionality: Kimberlé Crenshaw, Nira Youval-Davis, and Michelle Fine” in Michele Tracy Berger and Kathleen Guidroz (eds), *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy Through Race, Class & Gender* (Chapel Hill, 2009), 61–80, at 65.
and female,” (p. 14), the contents of his book suggest otherwise. He first sees intersectionality as synonymous with Byzantium, which is “indefinitely complicated, and it is often characterized as devious, deceitful, and corrupt” (p. 15). He then uses intersectionality to talk about a number of disparate topics, such as the former sexuality of Saint Mary of Egypt, the Virgin’s Consent, Prokopios’s treatment of the empress Theodora’s early life, abortion and contraception in medicine, women saints leading a monk’s life, representations of the Doubting Thomas, and visual depictions of an Ethiopian Eunuch from the Acts of the Apostles. As he remarks, these figures are intersectional for being “able to make choices about their sexual consent, pursue abortions and contraceptives, live as transgender monks, engage in same-gender intimacies, and be black at court” (p. 16).

Betancourt’s discussions of these and other Byzantine figures do not take into consideration class, an essential category of intersectionality. Most of the examined figures belong to the Byzantine elite (e.g. empress Theodora; Antonina, the wife of Justinian’s general Belisarios; saint Eugenia/Eugenios; the polymath, author, and politician Michael Psellus; the princess Anna Komnene, who is erroneously called “empress,” p. 115, 263). In fact, there is no mention of deeply marginalized and erased groups in Byzantium, such as children, invalids, slaves, poor people, wet nurses, magicians, heretics, and non-Christians.

Furthermore, a number of figures presented as marginal and silenced were not in fact treated as such in Byzantium and beyond. Theodora was already an empress when Prokopios started writing his Secret History and she was probably dead when this work had some circulation. Mary of Egypt, to mention another example, has been one of the most popular medieval saints in both East and West. She is still one of the most celebrated saints of the Greek Orthodox Church. Betancourt also claims to investigate the “intersectionality of identity across the Byzantine world” (p. 15). This is hardly the case not only because identity in
Byzantium was not just one, but many including much more aspects than those he takes into consideration (e.g. age, disability, class, profession, religion), but also because the examined sources – textual and visual – cover a period from roughly the 4th to the 12th centuries. The late Byzantine period (13th – 15th centuries) is, unfortunately, completely left out.

*Byzantine Intersectionality* falls into five chapters (I. “The Virgin’s Consent,” II. “Slut-Shaming an Empress,” III. “Transgender Lives,” IV. “Queer Sensations,” V. “The Ethiopian Eunuch”) framed by an Introduction and an Epilogue. A bibliography and index are also included. The Introduction opens with the story of Mary of Egypt. Referring to early Byzantine versions of the story (an episode in Cyril

---

**Figure 1** St. Mary of Egypt, 12th-century fresco from the church of the Panagia Phorbiotissa in Asinou, Cyprus. Photo: A. Stylianou and J. A. Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus: Treasures of Byzantine Art*, 2nd ed., p. 120; Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints’ Lives in English Translation* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), cover image.

365
of Scythopolis’s “Life of Kyriakos” in his Lives of the Monks of Palestine, 6th century; a version in chapter 179 of John Moschos’s, Spiritual Meadow, 7th century; and the Life of Mary of Egypt 7th century, Betancourt provides a reading that is severely offensive to women whose sexuality is seen as a danger to men. In all cases, he understands Mary’s or the anonymous female saint’s isolation as a form of escape from either lustful men or her lustful self, attempting to protect men rather than to develop a distinct female spirituality which is what is celebrated by the texts in question.

The accusatory tone against Mary persists, almost obsessively, in the Introduction. Mary is characterized as “a sexually promiscuous woman […] who escaped into the desert to find liberation from her lust”; “a lustful woman from whom men need protection” (p. 1). “Mary voices her voracious lust, describes how she raped many men” (p. 4). “Mary’s sexuality [is pathologized] not just as lewd or shameless but also as violent, criminal, and fundamentally inhumane” (p. 5).

Betancourt accuses the anonymous hagiographer – probably a monk – of using the “tactic of slut-shaming: a rhetorical practice of criticizing a person’s appearance, behavior, or both for failing to adhere to gender-based expectations about their sexuality” (p. 2) – this, however, was by no means the approach of the monk Zosimas who listens to Mary’s story and circulates it later. At the same time, Betancourt proclaims: “it falls upon us as readers and historians to call out these male authors for their rhetorical violence against these women” (p. 4).

This is all well and good, but doesn’t Betancourt fall foul of that which he accuses the older male authors to do? Rewrite the story of a woman, either fictional or real, and coerce her into his own narrative? It should also be pointed out that his readings are not always supported by the Byzantine sources and their contexts. For instance, his argument that the “anonymous author’s slut-shaming […] places Mary of Egypt beyond redemption or compassion” (p. 3) is cancelled by both Mary’s canonization and the final paragraphs of the Life of Mary of Egypt, where we read, among other things, the following: “And may God deem us (monks) worthy of the state and position of this blessed Mary, the subject of the story” (Life of Mary of Egypt
chapter 41). Evidently, Betancourt’s missive that “to deny these realities [the “slut-shaming” of authors such as Mary’s hagiographers and Prokopios] is to be complicit with violence – both physical and rhetorical – not just in the past but also in the present” (p. 17) may be well-meaning, but it appears empty and misplaced.

In the first chapter, Betancourt explores the consent of the Virgin in the Annunciation, highlighting its significant role in homiletic and artistic works after Iconoclasm. Through the discussion of the Virgin’s consent, Betancourt aims at bringing to the fore the importance that the Byzantines gave to women’s consent to sex and reproduction. We know, of course, that such a consent was to a great extent only theoretical. One thinks of the very young elite women who were forced into marriage, often with much older men, to serve their families’ dynastic, political, and other aims. A striking case in point is Simonis, the five-year-old daughter of Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282–1328), who was forced to marry the forty-year-old Stephen Milutin of Serbia.

Some of Betancourt’s readings in the first chapter, such as the analysis of patriarch Photios’s (858–867, 877–886) homily on the Annunciation, are compelling and well-documented. Yet, his juxtaposition of Annunciation iconography with iconography surrounding rape in the Sacra Parallela is unfortunate – to say the least. His references of the Virgin as being “raped” by God are equally problematic. Rape is a word used lightly and – whether knowingly or not – intensively, revealing the analysis’ fascination with this brutal act against women. Another mishap is Betancourt’s explanation concerning the throne of God in the illuminated manuscript of James Kokkinobaphos’ (12th century) homilies: “Gabriel approaches the throne of God, empty because the Holy Spirit has entered Mary’s womb” (p. 53).

———

This “empty” throne, however, is a Christian symbol for the prepared throne, known as *Hetoimasia*, for Christ’s Second Coming, a meaning that is still in use in the Orthodox Church.

The second chapter deals with Prokopios’s treatment of empress Theodora’s early sexual life in his *Secret History*. Betancourt places particular emphasis on Prokopios’s use of graphic sexual details and accusations against the empress and other women engaging in abortive and contraceptive practices. Betancourt goes so far as to suggest that “Theodora’s untimely death might even have been the result

**Figure 2** Empress Theodora, detail from Byzantine mosaic, c. 547 Photo: Wikimedia
of metastasized uterine cancer related to the abortive drugs and other practices that she had employed throughout her lifetime” (pp. 66–67). For Betancourt, it “is neither feminist nor ethical” to praise Theodora’s “repentance, her charity, her patronage, her contributions to society, or her total innocence without analyzing how slut-shaming operated in Procopius’s text” (p. 88). Sure, but is it not opportunist to neglect the context and obvious intentions of the author to belittle the Emperor through his wife? Worse, is it not unethical to imply that those scholars who read it differently are some sort of enablers?

Prokopios’s problem does not seem to have been Theodora’s early sexual life per se, but that a woman of the lower strands of Constantinopolitan society who had been a sex worker could ever become an empress. Nevertheless, Betancourt insists that “what is necessary is the articulation of an image of a sexually active, promiscuous, abortion-having, orgy-partaking, oral-sex enjoying, sodomitical Theodora […] regardless of whether Procopius’s portrayal of Theodora is at all accurate” (p. 88). Is then Prokopios’s Theodora real or fictional? And if the latter is the case, why should we distort the reality about Theodora’s actual life? That sex workers undertaking extreme or nonnormative practices existed in 6th-century Constantinople is a self-evident reality. There is no point at proving this by persistently drawing an image of Theodora such as the one that Betancourt creates in his second chapter entitled: “Slut-Shaming an Empress.”

The third chapter focuses on the Lives of transgender saints. The chapter’s aim is to understand both the social, religious, and medical practices framing the examined saints’ Lives and what a transgender identity might have looked like in Byzantium. Betancourt criticizes other Byzantinists (myself included) for using such “pejorative” terms as “transvestite” or “cross-dressing” to talk about these saints. The term “transgender” might be more appropriate for calling some of these saints, such as Mary/Marinos, Theodora/Theodoros, Euphrosyne/Smaragdos, and Pelagia/Pelagios who live their whole lives as eunuchs or men. However, the terms “transvestite” or “cross-dressing” are more suitable for another group of female
saints, including Thekla, Eusebia/Xene, Susanna/John, Matrona/Babylas, Marina/Marinos, and Euphrosyne the Younger/John, who spent parts of their religious or monastic lives under a male attire. It is, therefore, important to keep in mind nuance and distinctions and also to allow that they may have only pretended to be men, since, as Betancourt rightly states, there’s no evidence that they actually identified as men.

Concerning the gender identity of eunuchs, which is the identity that most of the above saints adopt in their attempt to enter holy orders, Betancourt once again sees other Byzantinists’ approaches as inadequate. For example, Kathryn Ringrose’s convincing thesis that eunuchs functioned as a “third gender” in Byzantium is treated as unsatisfactory compared to Betancourt’s own designation of eunuchs as “genderqueer.” As he characteristically remarks, “I would suggest that eunuchs served less as a third gender than as embodiments of genderqueer figures” (p. 109).

**Figure 3** St. Iouliane, *Menologion - Book of Saints of Emperor Basil II*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MSS Vat. Gr. 1613/0283
Photo: Copyright Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana
The chapter includes some misconceptions. Its opening sentence states that Lives of women monks were produced in Byzantium “from the fifth to the ninth century” (p. 89). If we, however, take into consideration a considerable number of hagiographical texts – Symeon Metaphrastes’ rewritings of the legends of Thekla, Euphrosyne/Smaragdos, Pelagia/Pelagios, and Theodora/Theodoros in the 10th century; the anonymous Life of Marina/Marinos (11th or 12th century); Constantine Akropolites’s version of Euphrosyne/Smaragdos’s legend in the 14th century; and the Life of Euphrosyne the Youger/John by Nikephoros Xanthopoulos, and Constantine Akropolites’s encomium of the same saint in the 14th century – we realize that the production of the hagiographical texts in question increases up to 14th century.

Matrona does not serve as the abess of an unidentified convent in Constantinople (p. 93). She founds her own nunnery and becomes its first abbess. Pelagia was not a sex worker (p. 102), but Antioch’s most famous actress. Lives of holy cross-dressers or transgender saints did not function “as narratives and models of emulation” nor do they “betray a toxic misogyny in late antique thought” (p. 98). Furthermore, they do not “offer proof of the consequential gain […] by forsaking the feminine” (p. 98). The Lives of these saints, as suggested by the texts themselves and as persuasively shown by a number of scholars (e.g. Evelyn Patlagean, Nicholas Constans, Claudia Rapp, Bernard Flusin, Stephen Davis, myself, Crystal Lynn Lubinsky, and lately Julie van Pelt), functioned as uplifting stories, revealing a secret holiness which had to be honored in its own terms of heroism, offering thus unique moments of ritual community and communion among their listeners, both monastics and laypeople. As for whether these texts reveal a “toxic misogyny,” Constans provides the most suitable answer: “the lives of the saintly transvestite nuns suggest a moment when monastic androcentrism became a problem […]. In the symbolic process of redefinition, undefined and uncontrollable human potential is momentarily released, and the saint abandons structured relations in recognition of
The book appears to stage a competition between who is the most (or least) misogynist, what is feminist and what is not. No one can easily claim to be the spokesperson for feminism or for women. A reading that rightly takes a person’s chosen gender seriously must not be a reading where a woman’s gender is washed away. In *Byzantine Intersectionality*, the achievements of cross-dressing or transgender saints are always seen as male and never as female, while educated and intelligent women such as Anna Komnene are described as persons with a fluid gender. As Betancourt emphatically points out towards the end of the third chapter, “I hope that the reader can respect these figures as men” (p. 120). Through this statement, Betancourt appears to contradict not only the chapter’s thesis about the existence of transgender saints, but also one of his book’s main aims: to highlight the “need to shift away from an implicitly binary conception of sexuality” (p. 120). In short, for Betancourt real women are only the ones who appear “sexually promiscuous” in Byzantine sources; other women with spiritual, intellectual, and other aspirations are either men or have a fluid gender.

Aiming at revealing scenes of same-gender desire, the fourth chapter discusses textual and visual representations of the Doubting Thomas, an episode from John’s Gospel wherein the resurrected Christ appears before the Apostles, encouraging sceptic Apostle Thomas to touch His open spear wound as proof of His Resurrection. The chapter’s central argument is that “the senses are sexualized in a manner that often structures a queer desire toward Christ, whose image is similarly revealed and validated through the notion of a same-gender union in flesh and spirit” (p. 122). Once more, Betancourt overreads some of his material. For example, he reads Nicholas Mesarites’s (12th century) description of the Doubting Thomas in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople as sexually charged: “after displaying ‘a gaping opening so as to take in the hand of the disciple […]’ and seems

---

to fear the groping of the wound’. [...] The entire ‘hand of Thomas enters’ reperforming the violence of the lance” (p. 131). In Betancourt’s misleading interpretation of Mesarites’s passage, Christ and Thomas appear engaging in sadomasochism.

In another instance, in the Chilandar wall painting of the Doubting Thomas, the scroll at Thomas’s hand “is grasped awkwardly, held tightly against the body; it is clearly phallic in look and placement, stiffly pressed into Thomas’s loins and terminating in a rounded tip. [...] The prodding finger is symbolically displaced onto the erectness of the scroll, where finger and penis are conflated” (p. 134). In short, Betancourt has the tendency to sexualize various manifestations of male spirituality. He interprets Christian *eros* in purely somatic terms.
The final chapter is the book’s most convincing and most well-documented part. This fifth chapter examines a visual representation of the Ethiopian Eunuch from the Acts of the Apostles that is included in an illuminated manuscript of the beginning of the 11th c. commissioned by the Emperor Basil the II and known as the *Menologion of Basil the II*. The Ethiopian Eunuch is here discussed in the context of discourses concerning race, origin, and skin color to show how Byzantine artists struggled with the figure’s intersectional identity as a eunuch, a Christian, and a black African.

Byzantine identities were far more multiple, multivalent, and complex than what *Byzantine Intersectionality* proposes. Often the book makes misleading assertions which seem accurate but are in fact hiding or undermining established research and self-evident realities. Additionally, the book has serious inconsistencies destabilizing its very arguments and thus fails in its mission to offer a new, objective, and all-inclusive history of gender, sexuality, and race that could contribute to “the systematic changes to our culture, infrastructures, and systems necessary to produce a livable reality for oppressed identities in the immediate present” (p. 208). Finally, it is a great pity not to approach Byzantine culture’s products on their own right, but to use them to state the obvious: that bullying, slut shaming, homosocial and homoerotic relationships, trans and nonbinary gender identities existed in Byzantium. In fact, these phenomena existed millennia before the 4th century.