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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life, by Benjamin Kahan

30 January 2014

Laura Frost on a portrayal of abstinence not as an absence of sex, but as an organisation of pleasure

“Sex is a waste of batteries,” Morrissey once grumbled, echoing Andy Warhol’s quip that sex is “too much work”. To those of us who fall more on the D. H. Lawrence end of the spectrum, the idea of opting out of sex is a challenging – perhaps even kinky – thought experiment. In fact, despite the Eros-saturated culture around us, celibacy is hotter now than it has been in centuries. The media are obsessed with the limits of ecclesiastical chastity at the same time as millions of teenagers have joined evangelical abstinence campaigns such as True Love Waits. Germaine Greer, Muhammad Ali, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Lady Gaga have all been united, at one time or another, by just saying no. Could we be living through “an epidemic of celibacy”, as the psychoanalyst Susie Orbach has suggested?

It’s the pathologising of abstinence that Benjamin Kahan seeks to debunk in *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life*. Kahan argues that celibacy is not the absence of sex but is rather “a coherent sexual identity” in itself, a rich practice, a particular “organization of pleasure”. Here, Kahan sets out to “think sexuality without sex and to find the sexiness of no sex”. Celibacy is not the same as not being able to get laid. It is a choice, a show of agency, a great refusal. (Of course there are notable examples of imposed or coerced celibacy; for the long view of chastity and literary, theological and historical precedents such as Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, Shiva and Queen Elizabeth, see Elizabeth Abbott’s spicy 1999 survey, *A History of Celibacy*.) More specifically, Kahan argues that abstention has been a key political and social strategy in US culture from 1840 to the 1960s.

Celibacies is in dialogue with feminist and queer scholarship that has interpreted celibacy as a symptom of repression or closetedness, thus missing the ways in which sexual teetotalism has been part of both those progressive movements' histories. Seeking to restore that narrative, Kahan examines how first-wave feminists such as Margaret Fuller and Christabel Pankhurst preached celibacy and reform; he revisits the much-debated institution of "Boston marriage" (were those ladies getting it on or not?) and considers Marianne Moore's celibate literary celebrity. Showing how chastity has been a mode of political and social organisation, Kahan reads the Harlem Renaissance religious leader Father Divine's celibate interracial communities as countering the racist eroticisation of black bodies, W. H. Auden's (brief) vow of celibacy as a mode of "queer citizenship", and Warhol's Factory as an "alloerotic" kind of governance and a "celibate mode of collaboration". In each case, abstinence was a tactic for subjects who didn't conform to heterosexual or "out" gay/lesbian/transgender norms to shift their relationship to the social sphere.

Kahan concludes by considering a constituency that rocks the boat even more than celibacy: asexuality. That small cohort – the discovery of which prompted Alfred Kinsey to add a single alphabetic category, "X", to supplement his numerical sexual orientation scale – upends the whole premise of sexual drives. The year 2001 marked the founding of the advocacy group AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network) and sex studies scholars are scrambling to address this 1 per cent.

Although abstinence does not exactly come off as sexy in *Celibacies*, Kahan succeeds in making it legible, visible and historically significant for a period that is more typically understood as one of sexual expression and revolution. Kahan does for abstinence what Rachel Whiteread's reverse castings do for negative space: both reveal the thrum of what is typically thought of as emptiness or lack. Whether the theory justifies the practice of an abstemious life is another matter. "Give me chastity," one famously reluctant aspirant put it, "but do not give it yet."

Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life

By Benjamin Kahan

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