

book review

When No Means No
Re-reading Celibacy

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Benjamin Kahan

Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life

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Celibacy: it might be more fun than it sounds. Or so I found myself responding to a friend's account of her recent 'dry spell'. Although my reference to Benjamin Kahan's 2013 monograph, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life*, was lost on her, the vehemence with which this proudly single friend rejected the suggestion that celibacy might be a positive experience had me recalling one of the book's opening claims—that despite radical aspects of its past, celibacy has come to be seen as the exclusive territory of the religious, the conservative and the sexually repressed. The

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desire to rediscover the progressive potential of celibacy—as an individual practice, a reading method and a response to compulsory sexuality—motivates Kahan’s rereading of American literary modernism. To begin, Kahan eschews all association of the celibate with the singular, insisting on the necessity of engaging the term’s ‘interrelated and historically coexistent but not coextensive range of meanings’. (2) Celibacy, it turns out, is not simple. For Kahan, the discursive landscape of celibacy minimally includes ‘celibacy as a sexuality in its own right; celibacy as a synonym for unmarried; celibacy as a choice, performative, vow; celibacy as a political self-identification; celibacy as a resistance to compulsory sexuality; celibacy as a period in between sexual activity’. (2)

Celibacies traces that lively variety of associations as they emerge across the lives and writings of a number of familiar and lesser known American modernists. While the individual chapters of the book tend to consider material in line with particular conceptual concerns (such as celibate time or queer citizenship before Stonewall), each has at its heart the celibate life and interests of a different figure: Henry James, Marianne Moore, Father Divine (the African-American spiritual leader who used the public controversy over his mixed-race celibate marriage to further various political causes), W.H. Auden, Andy Warhol and Valerie Solanas. Resisting the tendency within sexualities studies to read celibacy as an alibi for homosexuality, Kahan uses these case studies to argue for celibacy’s productivity as celibacy. This productivity is sometimes literal, as when celibacy is identified as a necessary condition for the creation of literary works or public feminism (Chapter 1), sometimes discursive, as when celibacy is enmeshed in modernist subjectivities and temporalities (chapters 2 and 5), and at other times more directly political, as when celibacy is pursued as a strategy for citizenship and economic participation among the racially and/or sexually marginalised (chapters 3 and 4).

There is something powerful in this act of reimagining what celibacy might do if only because celibacy is almost always—even definitionally—associated with not-doing. Kahan identifies ways in which proclamations of celibacy have historically opened up spheres of political action to the socially and legally marginalised, and speculates that celibacy might also actively challenge heteronormative forms of temporality, sociality and desire. Again and again, Kahan demonstrates the capacity of celibacy to reshape the social. Auden’s short-lived vow of celibacy connects him to

a network of queer modernists, while Warhol's quirky eroticised celibacy becomes the ground from which artistic collaboration flows. Solanas's militant refusal of sex, including masturbation and fantasy, points to celibacy's capacity to forge political alliances and antagonisms at one and the same time. As Kahan briefly notes in his acknowledgements discussion of the relationship between celibacy and the life of the writer should be of interest to those of us with demanding academic workloads, who jealously preserve writing time, a mostly solitary pleasure, against the inroads of other professional and intimate demands. (xi)

While Kahan's rendition of celibacy's progressive history reminds us that celibacy has often been used as a strategy for overcoming exclusion and discrimination, I could not stop thinking about how often celibacy has been a constrained choice or strategic compromise: have financial independence as a woman, have 'mix-raced' households, have citizenship as a queer person, so long as you swear off sex. The questions these compromises raise—about the meaning of agency in contexts of marginalisation, about the unacknowledged price of civic participation—share the pattern if not the content of other queer critiques, such as the queer critique of the marriage equality movement.

This symmetry with a more general queer agenda returns me to one of Kahan's early points—that celibacy, like homosexuality, is the complex product of a constantly evolving network of discourses, institutions and practices. What seems a very commonplace post-Foucauldian observation nonetheless bears repeating in relation to celibacy, which as often as not continues to be figured in terms of repression: celibacy cannot be seen as a simple 'no' against the backdrop of a complicated 'yes'. As Kahan reminds us by quoting volume one of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, 'there is not one but many silences'. (4) In attending to the discursive conditions for celibacy's emergence as a sexual strategy rather than identity, Kahan is able to acknowledge the overlap between celibacy and homosexuality without conflating one with the other or ascribing undue causality between the two.

Kahan explicitly chastises those who read celibacy 'as "evidence" of same-sex eroticism', arguing for the necessity 'to read actual absences of sex' for what they are, not for what they are presumed to compensate. (3) This insistence allows Kahan to intervene in the critical stories told about the relation between sexuality and modernity, particularly those accounts of American modernism that suggest the

'explicit interrogation' of aesthetic content and form is parallel to, when not emerging from, a 'period of fluctuation' in sexual and gendered norms. (6) Kahan's focus on specific modernist figures thus checks both the tendency to read celibacy as a symptom of homosexuality and the tendency to read modernism as a symptom of a wider sexual upheaval.

Throughout the book, Kahan interweaves his discussion of the role of celibacy in the lives of modernist figures with readings of their poetry, novels, letters, interviews and films. Where queer reading practices might look for textual moments that trouble gender or normative sexuality, Kahan mobilises celibacy's full range of connotations to trouble compulsory sexuality of any stripe. Many of his rereadings make original contributions to the scholarship on specific canonical texts, such as Henry James's *The Bostonians*. Kahan's capacity to frame Olive Chancellor's feminism in terms of celibacy draws out elements in the novel which might be lost in an analysis which considers her passionate relationship with Verena Tarrant as either frustrated or silenced lesbianism. As this example suggests, Kahan makes a strong case for a celibate reading practice—one that is attentive to the unmarried, single and sexless as interesting and complex topics in their own right.

In acknowledging the variety of ways queer and celibate practices, orientations and identities have overlapped, Kahan's method supplements rather than supplants queer reading practices. Although he insists on the potential of literary texts, especially those written by celibate authors, to convey celibate narratives, motifs and temporalities, at times the segue between author, text and intertext reveals a too-easy conflation between an author's sex life and a corresponding textual thematic. Kahan points to the large number of modernist writers, artists and scholars 'who were sexually recalcitrant, indifferent, alienated, unattached, lonely, and lifelong or periodic celibates', as cause to challenge the 'strong association' between modernist 'free verse' and 'free love'. (9) Relying on known or imagined celibacy, however, risks implying that textual specifics are best read in light of an author's sexual practices. The broad significance of Kahan's insistence on reading celibacy as celibacy would have been better demonstrated if he had executed at least one clean break between authorial identity, reported sexual practice and narrative thematic. This methodological quandary is one that Kahan shares with other reading practices that mobilise the queerness of the author to authorise the queering of the

text. The reach of *Celibacies* could perhaps be expanded if it approached its celibate texts with little to no regard for authorial legitimation. The uncoupling of text and author would allow Kahan to join forces with scholars of non-monogamy, such as Hidalgo, Barber and Hunter, who encourage us to read against the ubiquitous assumption of sexual-romantic coupledness.¹

Kahan's overall project is the expansion of sexuality studies to encompass those *not-necessarily-sexual* practices, orientations and identities that make their mark in the intimate landscapes occupied by all of us, not just those who identify, or are identified by others, as celibate. The impact of this argument reaches well beyond American modernism. In his conclusion, Kahan sketches some theoretical links between celibacy as it functions within American modernism and contemporary discourses of asexuality. Although celibacy and asexuality are not synonymous, they share similar analytical stakes. If queer theory too often presumes a natural affinity between radical sex and radical politics, Kahan persuades us that, in different times and in different ways, celibacy can be radical too.

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Jessica Kean has recently completed a PhD on polyamory in Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. Her ongoing research interests include gender studies, cultural studies, queer theory, intimacy and mononormativity.

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¹ Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo, Kristen Barber and Erica Hunter, 'The Dyadic Imaginary: Troubling the Perception of Love as Dyadic', *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 7, nos 3-4, 2008, pp. 171-89.

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