

Clark, Anna: *Alternative Histories of the Self. A Cultural History of Sexuality and Secrets, 1762–1917*. London: Bloomsbury 2017. ISBN: 9781350030633; 224 S., 4 s/w Abb.

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In *Alternative Histories of the Self*, Anna Clark offers five case studies of self-fashioning spanning the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century. The figures at the heart of this book – the French diplomat Chevalier/e d'Eon (1728–1810), Yorkshire gentlewoman Anne Lister (1791–1840), East India Company official Richard Johnson (1753–1807), philosopher James Hinton (1822–1875) and writer Edith Lee Ellis (1861–1916) – were all unconventional figures in their own times. Specifically, all five subverted expected gender and sexual norms (though, as Clark notes, they retained racial and class privileges). Drawing on a rich array of ego documents, including diaries, commonplace books, and letters, alongside other archival materials and contextualizing secondary sources, Clark examines how her subjects engaged discourses from philosophy, religion, classics, literature, and science to articulate a sense of self. Oftentimes, their textual interpretations of religious teachings and authors like Jean Jacques Rousseau, Lord Byron, Adam Smith, and Juvenal constituted what Clark calls a „queer method of reading,“ as they „drew on seemingly inhospitable discourses and exploited their paradoxes to create their own sense of self“ (p. 2).

Of particular interest to Clark is the degree to which her subjects engaged or rejected the idea of a unique self, a concept that first emerged in the eighteenth century through the work of Rousseau and Enlightenment thinkers. It was during the eighteenth century that, as Clark notes, „older notions of the person competed with newer ideas of the self“ (p. 9). Unlike notions of the person, the self was defined not by role or rank, but rather by self-examination of feelings and sensations. The individual's emotional world was taken as the grounds not only of one's self understanding, but also of one's difference from others. Clark charts significant shifts in conceptions of self

from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, from the „expressivists“ influenced by Rousseau, to the „sensationalists“ heralded by Adam Smith and Helvetius, to early political economists like Harriet Martineau and finally British socialists and sexologists including the Fabians, Havelock Ellis, and Edward Carpenter.

Whereas D'Eon and Lister posited themselves as unique individuals, Johnson and Hinton rejected the concept. Ellis uniquely sought to reconcile individuality and socialism, arguing that self-development and social improvement were not incommensurate. Clark describes Ellis' vision of individuality as one that „respected the difference of others while responding to the individual's needs“ (p. 145). Whether or not these subjects understood themselves as „unique selves“ to rationalize their non-conformity raises questions regarding their perception of their relationship to broader social structures. Did their sense of uniqueness make them more critical of existing relations of power, or was the very notion of the unique self complicit in these power dynamics? According to Clark, answers are not clear cut. Some subjects who understood themselves as singular came to dissent from the dominant order; d'Eon, for example, rejected the absolutist state and supported the French Revolution. Yet others like Anne Lister resided comfortably within the status quo: Lister accepted trappings of aristocracy and believed that her uniqueness separated her from and placed her above other women. As Clark notes, „the unique self could also be seen as a genius or overman in the Nietzschean sense, whose superiority meant that he did not have to take others into account. Being a unique self could also be isolating from others, unless uniqueness led to a recognition of the difference and value of all“ (p. 27).

Intriguingly, those who rejected a concept of the unique self were no more likely to provide unequivocal answers to the aforementioned questions. In the case of Richard Johnson, despite his disinterest in celebrating his differences from others, he came to accept the British Empire and subscribe to racist ideas concerning colonial subjects. James Hinton, meanwhile, celebrated self-sacrifice in the ser-

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vice of social justice on behalf of the poor, yet simultaneously viewed himself as a prophet freed from existing moral standards and deserv-ing of sacrificial acts by others – especially women. According to Clark, only Ellis’ efforts to bridge socialism and individualism offered a route to recognizing the uniqueness and dig-nity of all peoples, regardless of their station (p. 150). Collectively, these cases demonstrate that philosophies of the self could have „both radical and conservative implications“ (p. 12).

All of these figures were „queer“ but in dif-ferent ways; while d’Eon, Lister, and Ellis di-verged from prevailing norms through their gender identity and same sex desires, Johnson and Hinton practiced unconventional forms of heterosexuality, with Hinton most notably advocating polygamy. Interestingly, both the heterosexual cisgender white men included in the study disavowed the unique self and turned away from private self-reflection of their emotions, instead focusing on the ex-ternal world. Although Clark does not ex-plicitly make this argument, it is worth con-sidering whether these men were more dis-posed to disavow a unique sense of self be-cause their identity was considered synony-mous with the universal. Privilege – whether racial, class-based, gender, or sexual – cer-tainly seems to have been a significant factor in these figures’ self-conception. Disavowing uniqueness could therefore, perhaps counter-intuitively, be construed as the most privi-leged subjective move.

*Alternative Histories of the Self* makes a distinct contribution to the history of sexu-ality by examining how subjects constructed and reworked their self-conceptions „with the ingredients of their own personalities, mate-rial circumstances, and the cultural discourses available to them“ (p. 5). As Clark notes, her book is interested in demonstrating the creativity of her subjects in their acts of self-definition; rather than „simply following the intellectual trends of their time,“ Clark ex-plores how d’Eon et al. „twist[ed] and trans-form[ed] discourses as they explored their own lives“ (p. 29). Clark is explicitly not inter-ested in analyzing her subjects’ understand-ings of their sexual desire or documenting their sexual practices; rather, she is concerned with the ways in which writing provided a

space for the middle classes and minor gen-try to explore their transgressive thoughts and desires, and to divulge their secrets. Yet as Clark notes, purportedly intimate and private documents like diaries were „often written to be revealed“ (p. 7), and thus were spaces in which the self was not revealed but cre-ated (p. 8). *Alternative Histories of the Self* raises complex questions regarding the rela-tionship between sexuality, race, class, gen-der, and selfhood, and would be of interest to intellectual historians, modern European his-torians, and historians of gender and sexual-ity.

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