

Exile, Revelation, Revolution

McKenzie Wark Interrogates the Body

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A review of

Reverse Cowgirl by McKenzie Wark. Semiotext(e) 2020

Told in vignettes, *Reverse Cowgirl* follows McKenzie Wark's life through the ever-evolving landscape of Sydney's gay and straight universes, exploring how the self is fashioned by time, clothes, class, music and sex. Wark's multi-textual memoir pulls fragments of fiction, theory and correspondence into her own narrative, uncovering meaning through rewriting and reinscribing myth. Both a conversation with herself, and with the reader, Wark interrogates how the body's meaning becomes created, observed, and interpreted. Her writing refuses a coherent trans memoir, imparting a sense of reverence for both that which the body knows but cannot name, and the power of self-definition. Essentially though, *Reverse Cowgirl* is about fucking, or more accurately, about being fucked.

Wark explores concepts of desire and power, copy and simulation, in order to tether feeling to what can be created. It is a lesson not in casting off gender, but stretching it, curating it, inventing it, and exploring what new possibilities exist there. At the same time that *Reverse Cowgirl* acknowledges and regards an innate bodily knowing of a femme self, Wark does not reify an inherent sense of womanhood. She challenges conventions of trans autobiography that seek to neatly interpret a constant and intrinsic being, where a reflection of the past always makes meaning of the present. Instead, Wark suggests a less essentialist reading, leaving room for contradictions.

In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich discusses trauma, fucking, and Butch-Femme sexualities, though maybe not in quite those words. Cvetkovich references Leo Bersani's reflection on gay male cruising in *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, describing it as "a celebration of the psychic experience of 'self-shattering' that being fucked enables." Emphasizing that it is, "...not strictly reducible to the physical experience of being penetrated." *Reverse Cowgirl* acutely expresses this sense of "self-shattering," describing being fucked as a state in which the self can be squeezed out, disintegrated, lost, unwrapped, flattened, upended, made to not exist. In the absence of self, masculinity—and by extension gender—ceases to exist altogether, creating an opportunity to become something else entirely.

Cvetkovich contrasts Bersani's assertion with the writing of femme authors, such as Joan Nestle, who describes being fucked by her lover in *The Gift of Taking*, by stating, "She is a total force over me, and yet all her power is giving me myself... a self that must live in this body and thus desperately needs reconciliation." While Cvetkovich juxtaposes these experiences, Wark puts them in conversation. The psychic "self-shattering" as a necessary prerequisite to creating space for another self to be found. What is fucking if not a reconciliation between the somatic and the psychic? This is made evident by Wark's repeated references to circlusion; seeking out a feeling of powerlessness is its own kind of power, one that manifests in the pursuit of one's own pleasure. This mirrors other femme accounts Cvetkovich references, which describe a clearly defined sense of autonomy and authority over their own sexual desires. Confronting tidy delineations between sexual desire and gendered existence, Wark intimately ties want and wanting to a sense of being and becoming.

This is one of my favorite things about *Reverse Cowgirl*: Wark speaks to a certain kinship among gender and sexual outcasts, an acknowledgment of and reverence for the experiences that have no “proper names.” At one point she states, “...between the kinkier dykes and the gays who failed to clone themselves, something was emerging that would later become queer.” This book feels to me like a practice in surfacing stories from this exiled place, and in doing so, revealing through-lines between these narratives that would otherwise remain separate. In many ways, Wark herself complicates the neat distinctions between the containers of fag and dyke, and *Reverse Cowgirl* opens up space for the complexities of that which cannot be described easily. In an explicitly femme sense of determining and pursuing her own pleasure, threads between femme lives are tied, and pulled taught.

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