

WRITING SELVES

Max Shirley

McKenzie Wark, *Love and Money, Sex and Death: A Memoir*, Verso, 2023, 176pp, £14.99 hardcover.

Speaking at the London Review Bookshop this past October, to accompany the release of her new book, *Love and Money, Sex and Death: A Memoir* (2023), McKenzie Wark was asked what her party trick is by Lauren John Joseph. Nothing comes to mind immediately for Wark and, after dispelling some of Joseph's wry suggestions, the conversation moves on to discussions about memes and *femmunism* – a concept detailed in the text during the letter 'To Veronica', where Wark recalls playing 'the Theory Game' over dinner with a friend in New York (p95). Diverting somewhat from her earlier work's focus on media theory and the commodification of culture, Wark's latest publication puts the author centre stage. While the recent *Raving* (2023) and *Reverse Cowgirl* (2020) might carry the generic title *autofiction*, both works are still pollinated by critical theory and thought. Wark's Marxist outlook and celebrated critiques of capital are not quite left at the door in this new text – as this opening anecdote demonstrates – but its tenderness is welcome and unmatched.

Love and Money, Sex and Death takes the form of an epistolary memoir, consisting of letters written across three sections dedicated to Mothers, Lovers and Others. The text is also bookended by two letters addressed to a past McKenzie, aged twenty and forty respectively. The epistolary form allows Wark to narrate her life experience and transition under the guise of a stable narrative reader-writer relationship: the letters are addressed to specific individuals and ostensibly authored by Wark. Yet, as any passing literary critic will tell you, penning a letter is always an act of writing to and for oneself. In this case, the letter also allows Wark to write toward the presumed reader of the published text, troubling the specificity of the second-person address. Wark does, however, retain the sense of intimacy and unavoidable relationality that comes with the personal and individual process of writing a postcard to a friend or loved one. The epistolary composition of Wark's book is simultaneously an outward expression of a self to the world and an act of witnessing – the witnessing of what others have done for the author throughout their life. For instance, in the letter addressed 'To Mu', in the text's 'Lovers' section, Wark begins, 'I don't remember how I found you, Mu; I remember how I lost you' (p53). The second-person narration only adds to this touching record of Mu and Wark's short relationship, which attempts to harbour the love and commitment that Wark failed to provide at the time, by her own admission. Witnessing also extends from the intimately personal to

the political as Wark contends with her whiteness and privilege in the letter 'To Venus' which necessarily highlights the prejudice and danger experienced by black trans bodies daily (p121). To borrow a feminist maxim, then, Wark's letters embody both the fact that the personal is political and the political is personal.

Wark is necessarily sceptical, however, of formal literary conventions and memoir as a genre – sceptical, that is, of the very subtitle that this book carries. In her letter 'To Jenny', Wark delineates how medico-discursive institutions force trans individuals to create a coherent and gendered narrative of self in order to receive care and recognition. She writes: 'Memoir, the confessed account of the true self, is demanded of us. Fuck that' (p84). The forcing of an individual to reveal or 'out' themselves can be an act of violence and an impossible request. The body – and its intricacies, its instances of flux – is something learned and felt through writing and interactions with other bodies; it is not a known or predetermined fact, and this is demonstrated by Wark. A gendered 'I' is little more than a grammatical placeholder on the page. The writing of genre and gender become increasingly intertwined as Wark explores in the postscript to the text: 'It will turn out,' Wark writes to her forty-year-old self, 'that finding genre (text) is not unconnected to finding gender (flesh)' (p145). Indeed, this notion is present in one of Wark's opening letters where she writes, 'We cut and fold flesh. Like text, like collage' (p25). Through finding a way and words through which to express herself, Wark demonstrates that the self, and our sense of self, is always fictitious. You can play with the syntax of a sentence just as you can play with the allegedly discrete categories of gender, and just as you can play with yourself.

The dialectical relationship between the self and other – perhaps the primary project of the text itself – is gestured toward *Love and Money, Sex and Death* through the *detournement* of a Rimbaud quote that is often translated to 'I is another'. In Wark's hand, this shifts and transitions to: 'Time is another' (p9), 'Flesh is always-other' (p25), 'I is a-nothing' (p72), 'I is in-other' (p86), 'Us is an-other' (p127). All or none of these concatenations could be true or false. It does not matter. What Wark reminds the reader, through her letters, is that we are always already in relation to and with others, and we depend upon this contact. Perhaps, then, Wark does have a party trick. The trick, though, is not an offhand gimmick but the increasingly important act of expanding the party itself – or in Wark's case, the rave – of making room for an-other; for us all.

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