

ECSTATIC ÉMIGRÉ

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Claudia Keelan

REVIEWED BY DANIEL SCHONNING

"In the space between 'I' and 'You' we shall find ecstasy." So offers Claudia Keelan in the prologue to her collection, *Ecstatic Émigré*. Rendered anew in each essay of the generous work, this "space" becomes the focal point of the entire project. Keelan calls her reader to attend to the distance between meadow and city center; between poetic ancestor and inheritor; between our present mode of writing and a "language not yet made." In this radical *via negativa*, "I" and "You" collapse, reopen, reform — per Paul Celan, "undebecome" — inviting the reader, at last, to see through the poet's own eyes.

Time and again across the collection, Keelan offers a clear-eyed look at the many textures of her — and our — poetic tradition. In "It might have begun differently" — its title taken from William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain* — the environmental legacy of American poetry finds an exemplar in Walt Whitman's "Song of the Redwood Tree," in which the poet, as Keelan writes:

. . . gives voice to the trees in their dying. Whitman's redwoods are happy to die, and the dryads and hamadryads are willing to leave the tree, as they are all somehow magically convinced of the natural supremacy of the human . . . In the collision of pantheism and naturalism, materialism is born, pledged to the new, in human form, above all.

We are able, under Keelan's direction, to engage Whitman as agent of both great harm and comfort on the American poetic psyche — both complicit in the devastation of this "new" land and architect of his own redemption. From Whitman springs Henry David Thoreau, whose "wildness" invents a mythology that "subverts dominant paradigms of sovereignty, and paves the way for the modernity of phenomena in American poetry," whose writing is, Keelan writes, "as multifarious and miscellaneous as the natural world." Further troubling Whitman's "Redwood" is Alice Notley's "empire

of the spiritual," Brenda Hillman's elemental America — wherein "everything feels everything" — and Charles Olson's "delightful new civilization of man ahead." As the 19th century's "materialism" blooms riotous in the decades since, its poetic antithesis does the same. *Ecstatic Émigré* gives record to these movements within and without the craft, offering known events in terms and contexts that make them ever new.

The largest ethical designs forwarded by Keelan's essays — as by her poetry — are situated in the specific, the wieldy, and often the personal. To enter Keelan's *Ecstatic Émigré* is to become acquainted with the precise landscape in which she lives and writes — her Mojave, her bookshelf, her backyard. In "A Garden Is a Frame Structure," the poet considers her own hand in cultivating the land about her home. She writes, "I fool myself, thinking I am cultivating a meadow. It does not belong to me, and all the things I do to it — feed it, don't feed it, weed it, don't weed it — are futile, since its pattern is evolving, and unpredictable each season." The personal garden, she posits, is "a form of categorization, homage to mimesis . . . a paean to Art, and also a plot designed for use." In the project of the garden, Keelan finds a facsimile of the poem — a force at once possessed and dispossessed. It is a space built by and in protest of the "civilization" just beyond its boundary stones, and one with which its would-be "cultivator" must grapple.

As often as Keelan alerts us to the largest and most foundational ethics of her tradition, she refers also to their minutiae. Orbiting that most vital phrase from Rimbaud, "*J'est un autre*" — "I is an other" — she deconstructs poetry of witness, writing:

The failure of the secular is real; the other is me but her neighborhood is on fire. My suffering with her once convinced me that we were the same, but we are not. This community I built of our assumed common grief is to appropriate a body I do not inhabit and, by extension, is to write a false poetry.

Witness poetry, for Keelan, is not only an ethical failing, but also an effectual one. The movement, she writes, "fails because it succeeds in consoling"; it is made null from its necessary vantage in "the leisure class to which I belong," in a relationship between subject and

artist — steeped in a positivist belief in the individual — that neglects the community that exists beyond the singular “I.”

Keelan’s project attends, as evidenced by the above, to a poetics steeped in politics. In the piece “A Hinge-History,” when Marjorie Welish accuses Brenda Hillman of “writing as if the poem had a political calling,” Keelan rightly follows, “When, I ask, has it not?” No essay of *Ecstatic Émigré* is content to regard separately the literal and literary worlds. In “The Citizen-Stranger,” Keelan charts the history of America’s émigrés — from its native peoples murdered and displaced by “Christopher Columbus and other venture capitalists,” to the internment of Japanese-Americans in World War II, to the horrors inflicted on black Americans under Jim Crow, to the infinite “émigrés to come.” Each is crystallized by excerpts from Gertrude Stein’s “Poetry and Grammar,” considering that vital ontological link between a name given and an object named — word and world — as Keelan interrogates in her own collection, *Utopic* (Alice James Books, 2000). Stein forwards, “People if you like to believe it can be made by their names. Call anybody Paul and they get to be a Paul call anybody Alice and they get to be an Alice . . .” to which Keelan asks, “Call somebody citizen; does the name establish the condition?” Ever, she calls on her reader to regard not only the vitality of the written word, but also its boundaries, gaps, and bridges.

From the collection’s introduction to the interviews that make up its close, *Ecstatic Émigré* is brimming with insights — some an intricate delight to unpack, others pithy and direct. In the latter mode — nestled in the book’s footnotes — Keelan writes, “There is no Poetry. There are only poems, habitually moving toward the next poem.” Across the essays that make up *Ecstatic Émigré*, too, there is habitual movement; one feels — in equal parts — the concurrent reaching of narrator, reader, and subject. Claudia Keelan’s honest and generous mind tempts her audience ever from one potent question to the next. One feels, in reading this careful work, the dissolving space between “You” and “I,” until — wonderfully — *Ecstatic Émigré*’s crises and queries become one’s own.