

**Sekou, Lasana M. (2016). *Book of the Dead*.  
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Caribbean literature has been gaining stature and critical attention beyond its territorial boundaries, not only in countries whose people speak the Caribbean languages but also in such countries where the study of Caribbean literature, culture and history is part of university curricula, and where more and more high school teachers are introducing their students to this rich and colourful world.

The Caribbean is one of the most dynamic literary environments, where a lot is happening, where literary festivals are organised one after another and, mainly, where a new use of language is taking form, or, better, where language *happens*.

And when one talks about language, Lasana Sekou's name comes to mind at once with shimmering colours.

Mr Sekou's language is rich and colourful, yet his works also take the form of a cry for independence of St. Martin and its people. The small island is in fact one of the last existing *colonies*, still under the control of the Dutch and French governments. The aspirations for full independence are passionately pursued and Lasana Sekou is viewed as the champion of the St. Martin's independence struggle.

His body of work comprises 15 published books, most translated into Spanish, French, Dutch, German, Turkish and Chinese; an Audio CD of his collection *The Salt Reaper*, where he recites his poems to music; he is the recipient of countless international awards and honours; his works have been published as bilingual volumes, in English and Spanish (*Corazón de pelícano-Antología poética de Lasana M. Sekou/Pelican Heart-An Anthology of Poems by Lasana M. Sekou*), and trilingual volumes, in English, French and Spanish (*Nativity/Nativité/Natividad*). He is also a successful editor and mentor for new young writers.

*Book of the Dead* is his latest collection of poems; reading it feels like embarking on a journey not knowing where you will land, but knowing very well that the person at the helm will surely never let you down. It is a journey across very stormy seas – full of challenges and scary seascapes.

Embarking on this journey, the reader can expect to be questioned, prodded, pushed to the limits, but his or her reward will be a promise of redemption – only a promise, though, with no advance guarantees.

Are we ready to choose between Lucifer and Legba? Which god will help us to get out of Babylon and head across borders and boundaries towards islands that are depicted as metaphors for Jesus, to be sold, enslaved, stripped naked and covered in blood?

*Book of the Dead* is a history book, a book of remembrances and, therefore, about the power of memory and, as such, would lead to the *creation* of a universal canon – a canon that is deeply rooted in the soil of St. Martin, true, but whose branches are bound to reach other world regions across the ocean in a reversal of the Middle Passage.

The collection represents the struggle of creating – and evolving through the written word, through language – a way of interpreting the past, of appropriating the past, connecting memories to other memories.

Remembering means re-living the past, granting it a new life. And as painful as it might be, individual remembering is a step towards *constructing or creating* a collective identity.

Collective memory is a product of individual memories – family recollections, biographies and autobiographies – that, though often influenced by the present or by personal interpretations, when passed on from generation to generation after having been processed by the creative mind of true artists, contribute to building our identity.

But memory, though the bearer of immortality, is fragile. It can be tricky or misleading, it can be obscured by reticence, by involuntary amnesic aphasia (Freud 1953). And, thus, it is the artist's task to unveil and analyse such instances. To warn us that what happened in the past is actually happening today, in front of our sealed eyes. Lasana Sekou urges us to break open the seals that blind us.

This collection of poems reads the past through what is happening in the present, ties past history to present history, connects past horrors to today's horrors, yesterday's borders and boundaries to today's borders and boundaries.

Discussing the Middle Passage, writer Lorna Goodison stressed the importance of memory: "I know that, there is no way of forgetting something like that. I believe that the remembering of it is part of the equipment I have been given as a writer" (Calderaro 2006).

And here Lasana Sekou urges artists to become the historical *actants* who lead to the construction of a whole new society; suggesting that it is the poet's awareness that renders the history and memory of past generations immortal, warning us that we are actually recreating the boundaries and barriers of the past.

This new collection opens with a voice that is almost a murmur, with a rhetorical thought, with a choice that must be made, and ends, coming a

full circle, with "il' s'maatin" (61), with lines uttered with a voice that is no longer soft but has become firmer and stronger, though somber, after the thunders of the collection's middle part, because "time to choose./ soon come" (62) after having collided against boundaries, after the "Angel of Death" (52) has taken its toll and more "blood [has sealed] the cradle of the nation" (51).

Actually, with the last poem, properly titled «Seal», we are caught be-reaving, then falling into silence because every possible word has been uttered already, any choice offered, and Man is now faced with a choice.

The collection is filled with references to gods, myths and literatures of the past, with tributes to contemporary authors and reports about forgotten slaughters. In the first poem, we are faced with the choice between Lucifer and Legba. Then we hear about the fate of Pheippides, the messenger bearing the news of Athens' victory (unavoidably echoing Pheippides' words in Robert Browning's 1897 poem, «Athens is saved, thanks Pan»). It was indeed Pan, the god of wild nature, of shepherds and music, who helped the Athenian herald.

And so we begin by facing choices, a victory and nature.

The focus on nature, past and present genocides and martyrs of all nations expands Lasana Sekou's collection scope to touch larger audiences, both in the Caribbean and beyond, in lands that are theatres of slaughter and other horrors, because though some would say we're destined to repeat a pattern of horrors we might still have time to pursue a different destiny of our own choice.

In Sekou's poems, we find not only a narrative of people's past but also a portrait of a society that has been assembling pieces of various pasts, a mosaic of historical remembrances, a society that can survive and build its future only through these very remembrances, ensuring a solid foundation of shared heritage.

Events are reflected on by a narrating voice that shifts back and forth through myths and actual reports, blurring past and present in a continuum of devastating images, making the reader ponder over the connection between literature, culture, revolutions and the transformation of societies.

The collection is a wake-up call, a cry to preserve and cherish what we have before it is too late. Culture and heritage must be preserved and disseminated.

Lasana Sekou seems to suggest that it is through the study and dissemination of poems and stories by Caribbean contemporary writers, and through their involvement in building a new society, that readers outside the Caribbean could better understand how the memory of a horrible past can be processed by artists for shaping a nation.

And by retrieving, restoring and re-rendering their past through the use of art and poetry, people whose ancestors were uprooted, shipped away

from their homes, deprived of their language, their names, their identities and their heritage, can overcome their own aphasia and start building a new future.

However, Sekou warns us, it is a process that does not necessarily call for forgiveness but, on the contrary, requires full recognition and acknowledgement of the past by all the parties involved.

## Bibliography

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