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Book of the Dead

Michela A. Calderaro

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Lasana M. Sekou, *Book of the Dead*. St Martin:
House of Nehesi Publishers, 2016. 68 pp.

REVIEWED BY MICHELA A. CALDERARO

LASANA SEKOU'S *BOOK OF THE DEAD* WAS PRESENTED at the St Martin XIV International Book Fair in June 2016. St Martin, with its multicultural *calabash*, is indeed a perfect venue for an international book fair, being a place where a multitude of cultures, literatures and colours can come together to create something new and vigorous.

Today the Caribbean is a most dynamic literary environment, where literary festivals are organised one after another and, most importantly, where a new use of language is taking form, or, better, where language *happens*. Sekou has already shown in his vast body of work how language can become a formidable tool in the hands of an artist who, in a true re-invention of modernist techniques, makes us see, makes us hear, makes us understand.

In truth, when we start reading *Book of the Dead* we are immediately beguiled by its language, then we realise that language is so interwoven with content that it would be impossible to discuss one without considering the other. 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.

Sekou's craft in dealing with words allows him to combine a wide variety of languages – of enslaved African people, of colonisers and slave traders, and of the Caribbean diaspora – with the sounds of today's multifaceted Caribbean islands, to create a new and exciting language. The journey that Sekou takes us on with his new collection is, as is invariably the case in his writings, a journey across very stormy seas – full of challenges and scary seascapes.

Book of the Dead stirs emotions and elicits a strong reaction from readers; the poems turn the passive act of reading into an adventure, an actual journey on high seas, where we do not know where we will land. We turn the first page and we are already urged to choose between Lucifer and Legba. But how would we know which god will help us get out of Babylon and head across

borders and boundaries towards islands that are depicted as metaphors for Jesus – sold, enslaved, stripped naked, covered in blood? Will we find an answer at the end of the journey? Will the author offer a consolatory answer, or will he leave us hanging at the threshold of this New World?

A reader might ask herself whether she should embark on such a journey at all – to be questioned, prodded, pushed to the limits. The answer is yes, of course – even though upon embarking she is not offered any guarantees: the journey might have its rewards, or not, might end with redemption, or not.

While praising Sekou's language, one should never forget that his works also take the form of a cry for the 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 Sekou is viewed in St Martin as the champion of the independence struggle.

Remembering means also 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 – which, 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. Memory, though the bearer of immortality, is fragile: it can be tricky or misleading, it can be obscured by reticence, by involuntary amnesic aphasia. 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. 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. Once again, through Sekou's verses, we re-live the Middle Passage, and all the passages of today's oppressed and enslaved humanity; because it is indeed the poet's task to become the historical *actant* who leads to the construction of a whole new society; it is the poet's awareness that renders the history and memory of past generations immortal and warns us that we are actually recreating the boundaries and barriers of the past.

This new collection opens with a voice that is almost a whisper, with a


rhetorical thought, with a choice that must be made; and ends, coming full circle, with “lil’ s’maatin”, with lines uttered with a voice that is no longer soft but has become firmer and stronger, though sombre, after the thunders of the collection’s middle part, because “time to choose. / soon come.” after having collided against boundaries, after the “Angel of Death” has taken its toll and more “blood [has sealed] the cradle of the nation”.

The poems are 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 a choice between Lucifer and Legba. Then we hear about the fate of Pheidippides, the messenger bearing the news of Athens’s victory (unavoidably echoing Pheidippides’s words in Robert Browning’s 1897 poem of that name: “Athens is saved, thank 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 Sekou’s scope to include larger audiences, in the Caribbean and beyond, in lands that are theatres of slaughter and other horrors, because though some would say we are 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 a 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.

The collection urges us to preserve and cherish what we have before it is too late. Culture and heritage must be preserved and disseminated. And this is a task we are all called upon to fulfil – artists, literary critics and historians. Because it is through the study and dissemination of poems and stories by Caribbean contemporary writers, such as Lasana Sekou, and through his involvement in building a new society, that we can make people outside the Caribbean better understand how the memory of a horrible past can be processed by artists in order to become part of the lives of people whose ancestors were uprooted, shipped away from their homes, deprived of their language, their names, their identities, their heritage, yet by retrieving, restoring and re-rendering their past through the use of art and poetry can overcome

their own aphasia and start building a new future. 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 parties involved. 

NOTE

1. A shorter and slightly different version of this review was published in *Il Tolomeo* no. 18 (2016).