

# Sara Florian *Caribbean Counterpoint: The Aesthetics of Salt in Lasana Sekou*

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**Review of** Florian, S. (2019). *Caribbean Counterpoint: The Aesthetics of Salt in Lasana Sekou*. Philipsburg, St. Martin: House of Nehesi, 176 pp.

Recent developments in literary criticism (especially at the intersection of world literature, environmental humanities and postcolonial studies) have stressed the importance of commodity frontiers as a framework to understand colonial and neocolonial realities, and their literary manifestations. An example is *World Literature and Ecology: The Aesthetics of Commodity Frontiers, 1890-1950* (Niblett 2020), which explores the literary registrations of sugar, cacao, coal, and oil frontiers in Trinidad, Brazil, and Britain. Sara Florian's monograph, *Caribbean Counterpoint: The Aesthetics of Salt in Lasana Sekou*, might be said to partly cover similar grounds. This book explores the writings of Lasana Sekou, "poet, short story writer, essayist, author of dramatic monologues and historical profiles, and journalist from the Caribbean island of St. Martin" (2). St. Martin, divided between France and the Netherlands, is one of the few territories in the region to remain under the control of European powers. It is also noticeable because its history has been uniquely intertwined with the salt trade: salt was the main product of the island during the Slavery period, and its extraction left significant traces on the island's ecosystem. Both aspects, as Florian argues through-



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out the book, are constitutive of Sekou's work, whose nationalism, anticolonialism, anti-imperialism and internationalist political solidarities, as well as aesthetics, poetics and literary craft, are systematically interwoven with images of salt and saltiness. Florian's book uses salt as a point of departure to introduce Sekou's aesthetics and poetic vision, and then moves on to explore a great variety of issues within Sekou's oeuvre, while simultaneously paying attention to the wider cultural world of the Caribbean and to the history and ecology of St. Martin.

The book's title is useful to understand Florian's methodology. As she points out:

The title of this work on Lasana M. Sekou, *Caribbean Counterpoint*, hints - in the use of a piece of musical vocabulary - at his poetic voice as both independent from and interdependent with other Caribbean voices. [...] Poets of the Caribbean exhibit their own literary contours and colours, but they sing together, expressing different aspects of their society and creating exquisite, complex poetic ensemble in their production as a whole. (129-30)

This vision is embodied in the structure of the book, whose three central chapters (on salt, on marronage and on "West Indian" aesthetics, respectively) differ quite significantly in their focus: the former two are almost entirely dedicated to Sekou's work (albeit with several references to and comparisons with other Caribbean authors like such as Braithwaite, Walcott, Lamming and Glissant), while in the latter Sekou is much less prominent, and Florian focuses rather on other Caribbean voices. This shift, and other minor ones within each chapter, are rather abrupt, and not always fully justified to the readers as they move from one section to the other. As a matter of fact, the concept of "Caribbean Counterpoint", which helps to understand why Florian alternates between in-depth analyses of Sekou's work and long digressions on wider literary debates, is only fully introduced, rather belatedly, in the conclusion. Nevertheless, when the book ends, a clear design emerges out of its seemingly disjointed chapters, rewarding the reader's effort.

The book opens with an introductory chapter on the poet and his "I-land" (as he calls it in a poem). This brief chapter provides useful coordinates to set the scene of Sekou's poetry, including details on the (colonial) history of St. Martin: most notably, the marine salt trade and the island's diverse linguistic heritage, which play a crucial role in Sekou's work and in Florian's analysis. After these premises, Florian, in arguably the most fascinating chapter of the book, systematically maps the salt imagery in Sekou's work. As she argues, salt (at times in combination with sugar) presents itself as a versatile set of symbols and images that connects the various facets of Se-

kou's poetic imagination. Salt, for instance, allows Sekou to find the images and the words to talk about slavery and colonial violence in St. Martin: a recurring image in his poems is that of the Great Salt Pond of St. Martin (as in the poem "The Great Salt Pond Speaks", from the 2005 collection *The Salt Reaper*), which has collected the blood and sweat of the slaves extracting the salt for the colonial masters and is therefore a literal repository of colonial history. The connection between salt as trade good and (salty) bodily fluids is a crucial one in Florian's analysis, as it allows her to connect slave labour and colonial history with rather different elements in Sekou's work: for instance desires and eroticism, or a sense of fertility that is also connected with the spread of revolutionary ideas. She also points out that salt, for Sekou, is metaphorically connected with the power to cauterize, preserve, season and heal, and that its connotation ranges from the physical to the spiritual and the political. Florian's attempt to pinpoint an "aesthetics of salt" – as the subtitle of her work recites – is at its best when it highlights the overlapping between these (at times widely diverging) associations. Moreover, Florian correctly points out that salt, while uniquely prominent in Sekou's work, also connects him to his fellow Caribbean writers. Florian, throughout the chapter, is always putting Sekou in dialogue with other Caribbean writers and thinkers.

After having established the aesthetics of salt as the founding element of Sekou's poetry, Florian moves on to discuss other aspects of his work. The following chapter is dedicated to marronage – the historical practice, widespread in the Caribbean and throughout America, of escaping plantations and forming communities at the fringes of slave societies. Florian explores how the recovery of the maroon figure is crucial for Sekou's politics and nationalism, as a symbol of struggle for freedom. Most crucially, she argues:

If we extend the concept [of the maroon] to encompass all human beings who resist abuse or the negative aspects of colonial experience, then we can argue that maroons still exist today. They are indeed present in Sekou's poetry and in his narratives. (56)

The maroon, therefore, is not only ubiquitous in Sekou's poetry, but takes different forms and resonates with a variety of different contexts, variously engaged in struggles for liberation – an internationalism that is facilitated by the multiplicity of colonial societies across the Caribbean and America where marronage took place. As she points out, "Sekou is continually portraying the maroon spirit as adaptable and unconquerable, as quite alive in the present day, ready to fight current forms of oppression and to remember" (84). Florian frames Sekou's engagement with marronage as a diverse set of images and references that allow him to engage with a variety of locales

and situations, similarly to how he uses salt imagery. Both the aesthetics of salt and marronage, moreover, have a role within the project of spiritual and political awakening that is at the heart of Sekou's writing. As the chapter progresses, the internationalism inherent to the figure of the maroon gives Florian her cue to discuss other ways in which Sekou practices a form of transnational poetry: the coexistence of multiple languages within his work – St. Martin English, Caribbean and African languages, European languages, as well as Chinese – and his incorporation of various musical and dance traditions as part of his own aesthetics. Sekou's poetry, therefore, emerges as profoundly glocal – rooted in St. Martin's history, but engaged, with its imagery and style, with the wider world.

The last chapter further explores Sekou's engagements and influences by discussing the evolution of a "West Indian" aesthetics, connected with the development of a "West Indian" identity. The chapter is rather ambitious, discussing crucial topics such as orality, the use of creoles and the role of the Caribbean artist. As mentioned earlier, Sekou himself takes the back seat in this chapter, which is meant to provide the reader with a wider literary and cultural context for the in-depth analysis of Sekou's work presented in the previous two chapters. While, as discussed above, this results in a sudden shift in the book's focus which is not handled flawlessly, Florian's ability to locate Sekou within wider critical and literary debate is ultimately admirable and makes for a better, more satisfying portrait of his poetic universe. To this aim, it should be noted that the book also includes an interview with Sekou, which complements very well the critical reflections carried out within *Caribbean Counterpoint*.

Overall, the book is a rich source of insight on a leading Caribbean author, being both exhaustive and framed within a coherent, suggestive interpretative framework. I would argue that one specific passage of the conclusion beautifully encapsulates Florian's reading of Sekou's work, weaving together the overarching concerns of the book – salt, marronage, language and politics:

Sekou's voice, arising out of the swamp of St. Martin, his salt marsh, his pond, or climbing and descending the heights with the maroons does not always speak in creole, but he often uses the creole languages of the Caribbean, forms of speech, including his St. Martin nation tongue to define his roots and characterize his writing. His voice is polysemic and polyglottic at the same time. His poet-warrior voice is strong, resembling the battle given by the maroons, and it is salty too, salty as unholy slavery. (130)

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