

Anthony Kellman, *Tracing Jaja*, Peepal Tree Press, 2016, 151 pp.

Anthony Kellman's *Tracing Jaja* (2016) is a biographical fiction that follows the last few months of Nigerian Jubo Jubogha, king of Opobo, also known as 'Jaja,' who in 1887 was exiled to the Caribbean by the British Crown -- first to St Vincent, then to Barbados, where most of the narrative takes place. Divided into sixty short chapters, the novel opens with seventy-year-old Jaja's arrival in Bridgetown. It focuses on his intimate relationship with his young Barbadian servant Becka, who improves his failing health with her care. She also supports him morally in his attempts to face his predicament as a man who was betrayed by the British in the context of a palm-oil dispute. Forcefully displaced from his native country after a mock trial, Jaja is indeed lonely and depressed by his "illegal bondage" (46).

If Jaja's unique story provides a fascinating subject for biofiction, so does his contrasted personality, which prevents us from merely seeing him as a helpless victim. While embodying resistance to imperial rule in Africa, the Nigerian king also comes across as a ruthless leader and warrior who does not hesitate to punish, or even kill, anyone who stands in the way of his authority. The ambiguity around Jaja also transpires in his double status in Barbados, as "[a] king, but [also] a black man who was a prisoner of Her Majesty's government" (28). So, if he is given privileged treatment as the head of a sovereign country by the representatives of the British Crown in Bridgetown, he is at the same time despised by white Barbadians, who either condescendingly smile in his presence or simply refuse to shake hands with him. These instances of racial prejudice make Jaja suffer, but he mostly faces them with strategic diplomacy, knowing that exercising restraint and wearing a "social mask" (105) are likely to speed up his return home. Such a duality equally surfaces in his private life, for, as Becka realizes, "Jaja's broad face revealed a capacity for both empathy and judgment. It contained softness but also a hardness, a power that sprang from his broad shoulders and erect posture" (23). To some extent, Becka, too, is presented as a multifaceted figure, whose attraction to Jaja is fuelled at once by her awareness of his royal status and by a form of "maternal desire" (26) that eventually gives way to sexual attraction.

Readers are given access to the private thoughts and feelings of these two exceptionally fated individuals. This is often done through telling, rather than showing, so that the narrative does not always fully achieve the psychological depth that fiction -- as opposed to traditional biography -- can generate. Nevertheless, the novel gives a clear idea of Jaja's repeated frustration at the many humiliations he has to endure, whether the paternalistic or disparaging comments about him in the Barbadian press or the shortening of

his original patronym to Jaja due the inability of the British to pronounce his real name (28). Likewise, the narrative provides a glimpse into Becka's frequent questioning about her future and that of Jaja, and makes the reader aware of how difficult her life is as a black woman of lower rank, who is liable to be at the mercy of (mostly white) men's sexual violence. Through Becka, one also understands the symbolic import of Jaja's stay in the Caribbean. In her eyes, but also in those of the local black population, the African king indeed represents a link to an ancestral, mythical continent, and is therefore a source of pride and inspiration: "Jaja was that African body, which she, like every one of her kin, knew she possessed. Jaja's presence had filled her with a knowledge that was both rational and inarticulate, had given her keener ears and eyes for traces of her past" (84).

Finally, *Tracing Jaja* contains a convincing and well-documented evocation of Barbadian society at the end of the nineteenth century. As an honorary white, Jaja is given the chance to visit several institutions on the island, such as the Assembly Chambers, Queen's College or the Garrison Savannah. These calls give Kellman an opportunity to describe the workings of a plantation society profoundly marked by racial and social differences. Jaja is personally made aware of these when he meets a Scottish man, John Cheeks (the organizer of what turns out to be the African king's failed escape), and comes to realize that, like him, John and the Red Legs "have strong reason to hate England," because "The English played them dirty too" (59). The island's rich fauna and flora is also depicted, with careful attention to visual, auditory and olfactory detail: bright red flamboyants, trilling sparrows and minty scents coming from the garden are just a few examples among many of the minute care with which the setting is beautifully conjured, sometimes at the expense of the emotional dimension of the narrative.

As the last chapter ascertains, a "humorous folk song" (147) was for a while the only surviving trace of Jaja's stay in Barbados, "as though he had never even been on the island" (147). Only Becka -- who gave birth to a child by the African king -- passed down a collection of newspaper clippings about him to their great-great-granddaughter in 1971, thereby ensuring "Jaja's ancestral presence" (149) in the family's memory. Nevertheless, Jaja's life story, his affair with Becka and the strange circumstances of his death in Tenerife on his way back to Opobo, all but disappeared from public historical radars in the years after his demise. This explains the extent of the research that Kellman had to carry out to put this novel together, on which he comments in the afterword to the book. By fictionalizing Jaja's life and highlighting Britain's betrayal and responsibility for his death away from home, the author of *Tracing Jaja* demonstrates fiction's power to redress history and restore human dignity to

individuals left out of mainstream historiography. Jaja's proud photographic portrait on the cover of the novel is forceful paratextual evidence of this.