

ERIC GARNER'S SEQUENCES OF LIFE RECONSTRUCTED: A STUDY OF MATT TAIBBI'S *I CAN'T BREATHE: A KILLING ON BAY STREET*

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Abstract

The examination of Matt Taibbi's I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street has enabled me to discover that the protagonist in this novel is the double of the historical Eric Garner, for their life mirrors each other. While the first is known as Essaw's husband, an asthma sufferer, and the American police officers' prisoner, the second shares the same qualifications, mainly that of prisoner which has urged him to death. This character's similarity with the historical Eric Garner has led me to acknowledge that I Can't Breathe: A Killing On Bay Street is a discourse on history. For this reason, I have confessed that Matt Taibbi has, through his main character, shown his endeavors in incorporating history into his work of fiction, and this incorporation has betrayed his source of inspiration in writing his novel.

Keywords: Protagonist, Eric Garner, Similarity, History, Fiction, Incorporation.

INTRODUCTION

Published in 2017, Matt Taibbi's *I Can't Breathe: A Killing On Bay Street* portrays not only Eric Garner's short sequences of life in Staten Island, New-York, but also reveals historical facts related to Blacks' victimization in this part of the United States. The novel introduces the reader to Garner's experience of life from his childhood, manhood to his death which is the result of his persecutions by the American police officers who, most of the time, pretend to have caught him with drug in the United States. The choice of *I Can't Breathe: A Killing On Bay Street* for this paper is linked to the author's reconstruction of the historical Eric Garner's sequences of life through the fictitious one whose life intertwines with that of the real-life Garner. Edward Wilson who first scrutinized it, states that "In this narrative, Eric Garner is the copy of the actual-historical Garner who died because of Whites' violence although suffering from asthma since his childhood" ¹. Similarly, Matt Taibbi himself argues that "Eric Garner was exactly the kind of person that they (the police) were trying to get rid of in order to make this more expensive real estate" (ICB: AKBS, p. 10). From these assertions, one understands that *I Can't Breathe: A Killing On Bay Street* is an account of the historical Eric Garner through its protagonist who seems to share the same sequences of life that urge me to put the following question: To what extent is Matt Taibbi's *I Can't Breathe: A Killing On Bay Street* the representation of the historical Eric Garner's sequences of life? I hypothesize that the protagonist's marriage with Essaw, his dwelling address, sickness, persecutions, and death are conceptual tools which attest of the author's reference to the historical Eric Garner.

The novel being the contextualization of the real-life Eric Garner, I find it necessary to resort to the new historicism to better examine the similarities between the latter and the fictional Garner, for Gallagher explains the new historicism as "the fact of reading literary and non-literary texts as constituents of historical discourses that are both inside and outside of texts" (Gallagher, quoted by Evrim Dogan: 2005, 82). In almost the same way, Greenblatt and

Gallagher consider the new historicism as “a theory applied to literature that suggests that literature must be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic” (Greenblatt & Gallagher: 2015, 119). These quotations evidence that the new historicism considers literary works as texts grounded in history. It acknowledges that a work of literature is influenced by its author’s time, circumstances, environment, and beliefs. This means that I look at Matt Taibbi’s novel with an eye to its historical context by examining how the writer’s setting affects his work of fiction and how this work reflects the writer’s setting.

Two main points are analyzed in this paper. The first is the author’s reference to Eric Garner’s life experience before his persecutions and death. The second examines his persecutions and death.

1. The reference to Eric Garner’s experience before his persecutions and death

Matt Taibbi’s *I Can’t Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street* depicts Eric Garner’s hardship in Staten Island, New-York city. This character is known for his coolness and love for his fellows. He never fights against anybody. Before being viewed as a drug seller, he hustles to earn money by working in different services in order to feed his family, as recalled by his wife Essaw in these terms:

Throughout most of his younger years, Eric Garner worked square jobs. After the security guard job, he worked at the Greyhound Terminal at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan. Pinky remembers coming down from the Bronx on Eric’s paydays, bringing little Erica in a baby carrier and holding her two little girls, Shardinee and Dorothy, by the hand. [...] Later, when the family moved away from the elephant cage to Brooklyn, Eric supposedly got another job, this one with the help of Pinky’s mother, whose day job was in quality control at a pharmaceutical company (ICB: AKBS, p. 16).

In this passage, one sees how Eric Garner appears as a responsible man. The author’s portrayal of him as a tireless man in the search for jobs as he goes from one company to the other is a way to tell the reader not to consider life as a doomsday because of the loss of job, but more as a moment of struggle. He means that life should be considered by any human being as a daily fight as evidenced by Eric Garner who, despite hard circumstances, keeps on struggling for his family as a breadwinner. Apart from his perseverance in the search for jobs which, for the author, should be followed by everyone, he is also viewed as a man of peace, for he devotes his life to breaking up fights in his neighborhood:

Fights [in that area] happen fairly regularly but Garner, one of his roles in that neighborhood was to break up fights, because fights attracted the police. He used to “keep the block from getting hot”. That was his expression. So he broke up this fight between these two characters, and as soon as he was done he went up and leaned against the wall to catch his breath, and it was that exact moment that he was approached by the police (ICB: AKBS, p. 20).

What Matt Taibbi shows through the breaking of fights is Eric Garner’s sense of social responsibility. He invites the reader to follow suit, that is to behave not as a trouble maker but more as a peacemaker within the society, for he believes that a society without peace is out of good cohesion and cannot go ahead. However, being a fight breaker in the quarter and working

in different services like security guard at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan Pharmaceutical Company is not enough for Eric Garner to make much money. For, he is later viewed as a drug seller and a man of misfortune: “*Eric Garner may have created a lot of his own problems, but he was also the victim of bad luck and atrocious timing*” (ICB: AKBS, p. 45). Through this quotation, one sees how the author raises the question of Blacks’ plight in the United States through his protagonist who endures rejection and victimization by his white peers. When he, for example, claims that he has “created a lot of his own problems”, he wonders why Eric Garner, as a black man in a land ruled by Whites gets involved in the selling of drug which is severely prohibited by the American Government. He uses the expression “victim of bad luck” to mean that he is sometimes oppressed and brutalized for things he has not done. What is true is that Whites’ eagerness to consider him as a culprit derives from the hatred they have for all Blacks they consider as foreigners and second zone citizens on the American soil because of the color of their skin. From this view, none of them hopes to deserve a good treatment from their white counterparts whose objective is to get rid of them so as to create a white America.

Matt Taibbi’s endeavors to draw the reader back to the historical Eric Garner’s sequences of life appear through his main character who embodies all Blacks’ shades of life. For, the latter’s experience of racism as echoed in *I Can’t Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street* really intertwines with that of all Blacks in the United States particularly in the 2000s, the years which remind people of the historical Eric Garner’s episodes of life on earth. But this experience which is part of the historicity of this narrative, does not place Matt Taibbi in the circle of historians. Cindy Vallar who is involved in the study of the terms “history” and “fiction” states the slightly difference between them as follows:

History and historical fiction are not necessarily the same thing. The purpose of history is to narrate events as accurately as one can. The purpose of historical fiction is to enable a reader through the perspective of characters in the story to feel that she or he is present at the events. Such a goal obviously requires some modification of the events ².

Through this passage, one easily understands that what is described in a work of fiction is most often the experience of real-life people in a given society to which the author stands as a witness or a spokesman. It is exactly in this context that Matt Taibbi’s *I Can’t Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street* was written. This means that this novel is a story of the historical Eric Garner, a forty-three-year-old African American who was actually suspected of selling illegally contraband cigarettes on a street corner in New-York’s Staten Island. Like the historical Eric Garner, the one in the novel is discriminated, rejected, and brutalized by the police which are supposed to protect his rights as a human being in a democratic nation. In a passage full of sorrowful feelings, one sees how the author reveals his motivation to write about this popular character in the United States:

I had done a lot of work overall concept of community and broken window policing from my previous book, *The Divide* [...]. I don’t live far from Staten Island, so I drove out to the park where Garner hung out and just started to ask people about what their feelings were about the decision by the grand jury in the case [...] My initial thought was just to do a Rolling Stone article about how it was an example of everything that goes wrong with community policing. But what ended up happening was that people just told me a lot of stories about Eric Garner as a person

and was really interested in him as this character (ICB: AKBS, p. 15).

Through this passage, one understands that *I Can't Breathe: A Killing On Bay Street* is the historical Eric Garner's "biofiction". The author's choice of this real-life person as the main character in his novel has been for him a way to show how black Americans are brutalized by institutions like the American police which, instead of protecting individuals' rights regardless of their racial belonging or origin, end up oppressing Blacks in a very cruel way. The interplay between history and fiction in this narrative appears clearly through the author's reference to Eric Garner as the double of the historical Eric Garner in the white man's world. Through his protagonist, he for example, draws the reader back to the moment when the real-life Eric Garner decided to get married with a widow older than him before his true wedding with Essaw Snipes, the woman with whom he got four children: "*They got married on August 26, 1989, and went on to have four children. Erica was born in 1990, then came Emerald in 1991. Eric Jr. was born in 1994, and the youngest boy, Emery, was born in 1999*" (ICB: AKBS, p. 15). In this quotation, one sees how history inhabits fiction. For, it is well known that the historical Erick Garner, too, was married to Essaw Snipes: "*Married for 26 years, Eric and Essaw had six children together. One of their children died as an infant*"³. As it can be seen, the author's reference to such an actual-real wedding gives his novel the form of a personal story telling, that is an account based on the life of a person who has really existed and whose episodes of life are grounded in the collective memory of people in the United States.

Matt Taibbi's endeavors to account for the relationship between the real-life Eric Garner and the fictional one are also evident when he gives details on the latter's dwelling place: "*One of their first living place was 2359 Southern Boulevard in the Bronx, right across the street from the Bronx zoo (...) Later, when the family moved away from the elephant cage to Brooklyn, Eric supposed to get another job*" (ICB: AKBS, pp. 15-16). Through these details of the character's living place, one understands that *I Can't Breathe: A Killing On Bay Street* is really a reminiscence of the life sequences of someone who has undoubtedly existed in the United States, for the address and the names of cities given here truly belong to this country and are known as places where the real-life Eric Garner shared life with his wife Essaw.

Another aspect that shows the author's efforts to establish the relationship between his protagonist and the historical Eric Garner is his reference to the latter's sickness. In fact, in the novel, Matt Taibbi tells of Garner's state of health which gets worsened considerably from time to time. The novel reads that Garner suffers from asthma, one of the most dangerous illnesses that rushes his death after he receives a chokehold from Pantaleo on July 2014: "*Garner had suffered from asthma since his childhood. He didn't know it, but this was a common problem among black people of his generation. [...] roughly two and a half times more likely to suffer from asthma, and to die from it*" (ICB: AKBS, pp. 68-69). Similarly, the historical Eric Garner, too, suffered from the same sickness, as evidenced by the New-York Times Editor Vivian Wang: "*Eric Garner was suffering from asthma for years. This was even known by his wife and relatives*"⁴. This quotation illustrates that in writing *I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street*, Matt Taibbi was really inspired by the historical Eric Garner's sequences of life, for his life experience mirrors that of the main character who is later persecuted by the American police due to the activity of drug selling, as demonstrated in the section below.

2. Eric Garner's persecutions and death

A reading of Matt Taibbi's *I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street* makes the reader understand that Eric Garner is persecuted by the New-York Police for several times because of his blackness and selling of drug. While the first reason is reinforced by the Whites' hatred for Blacks because of the color of their skin which, for them, dirties the American society, the second is, however, viewed as an illegal business for all Americans regardless of their racial belonging. It is indeed because of this forbidden business that the American police officers find it better to get rid of him in American society. One of his arrests, he argues, while writing a letter to his mother from a jail cell in Riskers Island, took place in 2007 in New York City:

On September 1, 2007, at 7: 30 p.m. on the corner of Castalton Ave, Heberton stopped me for reasons of their own. I was ordered to my hands on the back SUV in which they were riding in. I complied with no problem. Officer William Owens then patted me down by ways of going through my pockets and socks and not finding anything illegal on my person (ICB: AKBS, p. 32).

From this passage, one sees that the American police's purpose is to arrest Blacks pretending to have caught them with drug or other illegal substances. The protagonist's persecutions attest not only of his plight as a black person on the American soil, but more of all African Americans who unceasingly endure the white Americans' racist system. Their aim is, in fact, to remind them of their inferior position in a nation that declares itself as a land of democracy, but ends up oppressing its own inhabitants on the behalf of the color of skin. When Eric Garner claims that "my pockets and socks and not finding anything illegal on my person", he clearly tells the reader of his innocence about this arrest. This means that the author through this black character shows how Blacks' rights are violated by their white counterparts, for one sees how Eric Garner undergoes tortures from the Officer William Owens for an unknown reason: "*Under injuries, Garner wrote the following: the injuries I received were to my manhood in which Officer William Owens violated by ways of digging his fingers in my rectum and pulling my penis out in public (...) Officer William Owens violated my civil rights*" (ICB: AKBS, p. 33).

As it can be seen, Eric Garner's rights as an American citizen are not respected in the United States. What is incredible here is the way his nudity is publicly exhibited as a punishment for a crime he has not committed. This inhuman act which should normally be condemned by the law is, however, extolled by the American police as a way to show the supremacy of Whites over a race they usually take for granted. What is worth knowing is that Eric Garner's experience in the novel really intertwines with that of the historical Garner who, because of Whites' brutality over Blacks, lodged a complaint vainly against the same Officer William Owens. For, he, as a black American viewed as a drug seller, could not win a trial before a white man. In his article entitled "Daily Kos Community", Shaun King, for example, draws the reader back to this Garner's historical complaint in these terms:

On September 1st, 2007, seven years before NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo would choke Eric Garner to death in a video watched all the world, he filed a heartbreaking civil complaint against NYPD Officer William Owens, the city of New York, and the NYPD over an awful incident in which he was illegally strip searched near his home. In the complaint, Eric describes how Officer

William Owens, in the middle of the street, inserted his fingers up Eric Garner's rectum and made Eric pull his underwear completely down ⁵.

What one keeps in mind is that like the real-life Eric Garner, the fictitious one, too, is conscious of the way he is judged by Whites. He knows it in advance that, as a black man, he is far from being heard or understood, because there is no law guarantying the rights of Blacks as human beings in the United States. In the novel, Matt Taibbi insists on the law to denounce white officers' cruel attitude towards their black peers:

Garner knew the laws surrounding cigarette sales. He knew how many packs he could carry on him at a given time, knew what constituted a sale, knew what actions would trigger an arrest. He knew he could be charged with serious offenses with longer potential sentences if he was caught crossing state lines with a trunk full of cartons but that he wasn't risking a much time standing on a street corner. Street corner time was time he could live with (ICB: AKBS, p. 71).

The selling of cigarettes, especially drug which is also condemned in many of the world countries gives the American police officers the right to arrest Eric Garner. But what is hidden behind their cruel attitude towards him is his racial belonging which is not accepted by Whites in the United States. The selling of drug is taken by them as an alibi to torture him mercilessly as a way to remind not only him, but all Blacks of their inferior position before the white man on the American soil. For, in the United States, the police are viewed as an institution created to protect the rights of Whites and trample down those of Blacks. The author's reference to the business of drug shows how Blacks endure oppressions from Whites on the behalf of the law in the white man's world. In the passage below, for example, Matt Taibbi explains how the American police take an interest in Eric Garner's life:

I think he attracted the attention of the police because of his appearance. The police take pictures of neighborhoods, and if they see people who they believe don't have the right appearance, they want the police to clean up the blocks, so Garner was sort of a target of police because he was big, because he had a kind of a slovenly appearance, and because, I think, there are certain people who decided he was just unseemly to look at (ICB: AKBS, p. 23).

What is conveyed through this passage is Whites' hatred for Blacks. Garner who is mistreated by the police is just the embodiment of all Blacks who are supposed to suffer all the atrocities of the American society because of the color of their skin. The protagonist is actually subjected to difficult living conditions pertaining to his drug selling. After being arrested over thirty times, he and his family are tired of this treatment. In 2007, as the novel reads, when Garner is in jail for crack selling, Essaw his wife, calls him and tells him how much she is very upset-minded because of his repeated arrests. She then decides to no longer pay a visit to him: *"You don't visit me, I'm going to kill myself, he told her by phone. Don't kill yourself because of me, she said sharply. Kill yourself because you want to be dead. Garner had no reply to that"* (ICB: AKBS, p. 33). Essaw's decision to no longer visit her husband is not maybe a way to betray her love for him, but more to urge him abandon his cigarettes business that often leads him to jail. She thinks that such a decision from her will undoubtedly push him to follow her piece of advice, for the truth is that Garner and Essaw love each other very much, and that none of both is ready to leave the other as shown through Garner's decision to "kill himself in jail". The pressure of his wife to urge him

to abandon this illegal business appears through her refusal to send him money and packages of cigarettes: “I refused to send him money. I refused to send him any packages. I just refused”, Essaw explains. “I used to tell him, ‘If you needed all this stuffs, you should have stayed your ass out of jail” (ICB: AKBS, p. 33). It is important to recall that Essaw’s pressures on her husbands to abandon such a business has been a success. For, one sees how he dreams of a house where he and his wife will peacefully raise their family. The passage below illustrates the protagonist’s dream of putting an end to such an illicit business and concentrate on his family welfare:

He told Essaw, I’m ready to sit on the porch and sip mint julep and watch the kids run around in the front yard. That was his dream, his wife says. His dream was for us to get a house and to have the grandkids running around and him just sitting there sipping his mint julep, as he called it. She laughed. He was ready to settle down and stop hustling and just be at home (ICB: AKBS, p. 99).

It is clear that the only thing Eric Garner now wants in his life is to find a house where he can peacefully live with his family and stop with cigarettes business. The author’s account for this character’s life with regard to his financial activities really draws the reader back to the life of the historical Eric Garner who, because of his selling of cigarettes, was also wanted by the police in New-York:

Eric Garner was the subject of a QOL action originally designed for storefronts. The enforcement action against Eric Garner for selling untaxed cigarettes in an open-air market was initiated by 311complaints and QOL complaints. [...] Eric Garner’s activity was specifically brought up at a Comp Stat meeting, and the 120th Precinct Commander was directed to address the issue (Costello: 2018, 124).

One sees how American police officers victimize Eric Garner on the behalf of the law against the selling of drug. The Quality Of Life (QOL) was, in fact, a strategy used by the police to help realize their activities in plainclothes in New-York City. This strategy worked well, for Eric Garner was seen many times selling untaxed cigarettes to undercover police officers. This pushed American police officers to have an eye on him as it is the case in Matt Taibbi’s *I Can’t Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street*. In this novel, the author shows how these white police officers claim to have found drug in Eric Garner’s pockets. Despite his pleading for his innocence as he voices it out: “I got nothing”, “I got nothing” (ICB: AKBS, p. 104), they end up arresting him. For them, he is a drug seller. Even though they have seen nothing in his pockets, they cannot see why they have to let him free. This implies that the main cause of Eric Garner’s arrest by the American police is not actually the selling of drug, but his racial belonging which, for Whites, dirties the American society. That is why, whenever a Black is suspected or accused of being the culprit of whatever situation, he is doomed to receive a severe punishment that may lead him to death:

In any case, no official has ever said that Garner was usually selling cigarettes at that moment, except for the two police in the video, who at one point try lamely to argue that they saw Garner selling a cigarette – Twin, who was in the middle of a fight the entire time (ICB: AKBS, p. 105).

What is true is that the American police officers are, to some extent, responsible for Blacks’ plight on the American soil. For, Garner who is victim of the police persecution is just the

embodiment of the black community. This means that what he suffers is, in fact, the portrayal of all Blacks' experience of the police violence against them in the United States. When the author writes that "no official has ever said that Garner was usually selling cigarettes at that moment", he denounces the protagonist's innocence for such an illegal business. He means that the only testimony of the two police officers does not convince him of his guiltiness.

One of the author's references to the historical Eric Garner appears in the novel when he tells of his protagonist's state of health which gets worsened considerably from his first prison stint. The novel reads that Garner suffers from asthma, one of the most dangerous illnesses that drives him to death: "*Garner had suffered from asthma since his childhood. He didn't know it, but this was a common problem among black people of his generation. [...] roughly two and a half times more likely to suffer from asthma, and to die from it*" (ICB: AKBS, pp. 68-69). Similarly, the real-life Garner, too, died of the same sickness, as evidenced by the New York Times Editor Vivian Wang in these terms: "*He (Eric Garner) suffered from asthma from his childhood to his manhood. Even his wife Essaw knew that but was deeply in love with him*"⁶. Through this quotation, one sees how the similarity between the historical Eric Garner and the fictitious one is well established, for their episodes of life mirror each other.

Matt Taibbi's efforts to account for the link between the real-life Eric Garner and the protagonist are nowhere more evident than in the passage where he describes Eric Garner's death in Staten Island, New-York City through the Staten Island Medical Examiner Nicole Palmieri who announces his death as follows: "*Eric Garner's pulse gave out at 4:15. EMTs administered CPR in the ambulance, but it was no use. He was pronounced dead at 4:34*" (ICB: AKBS, p. 114). This mourning event which, in the novel, happens at 4: 34 p.m. after a chokehold by Daniel Pantaleo, a New York Police officer known for his brutal arrests is not far from that of the historical Eric Garner. For, in his article entitled "A Critical Race Perspective of Police Shooting of Unarmed Black Males in the United States: Implications for Social Work", Sharon E. Moore, too, illustrates the real-life Eric Garner's death with reference to the American police officers' brutality over him: "*On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner, 43, died after being wrestled to the ground by police officers and placed in a chokehold in New York City*" (Moore et al.: 2018, 37). This quotation shows that although suffering from asthma, Eric Garner's death was rushed by the American police officers' violence against him. He could perhaps have lived some years more if only he was not persecuted for several times by the American police.

The white police officers' view of Blacks in Moore's article goes along with that of Matt Taibbi in *I Can't Breathe: A Killing On Bay Street* wherein Eric Garner appears not as a human being capable of enjoying the full fruition of life, but more as a second zone citizen doomed to endure tortures from white American police officers because of his blackness. What is true is that Eric Garner is not the only black American who suffers this Whites' racist system, for the novel also hosts other black Americans who are victim of the Police machination of justice. For example, Laquan MacDonald (ICB: AKBS, p. 238), Carnell Russ (ICB: AKBS, p. 195), and Sayon (ICB: AKBS, p. 159) are also killed by the Police for invented reasons. What one finds too shocking here is the fact that those who caused these characters' deaths were not considered as murderers, for one could, for example, see how Pantaleo, one of the culprits of Garner's death, was still on duty to act as such. This is to say that in the United States, killing Blacks was not condemned by the law. Julius Lester in *And All Our Wounds Forgiven*, illustrates this fact through Jeb Lincoln who,

after killing Charlie Montgomery, is proud of his action, as Sheriff Simpson relates the scene to Bobby: *"Killing a nigger really didn't qualify as murder, you could only accuse somebody of a murder if they killed a human being"* (Lester: 1994, 111). This quotation, as it can be seen, evidences the nothingness of Blacks in a country which, they think, is also theirs but oppresses them for the simple reason that they are black. In the passage below, for instance, one sees the way Matt Taibbi describes the circumstances of his protagonist's death by showing how he innocently endures tortures from white American police officers who find pleasure in beating him mercilessly for a crime which is not officially approved:

[...] then the outstretched hand twitched, as if in a spasm. Garner now coughed and for the first time gasped "I can't breathe". One of the uniform cops saw his outstretched hand grabbed it, hopping to throw cuffs around it. "I can't breathe", Garner repeated. "I can't breathe". The four officers bent and twisted Garner's great body around so that his arms were now behind his back, his face pressed into the sidewalk entrance to the beauty supply shop (ICB: AKBS, p. 112).

From this passage, one understands that the title of Matt Taibbi's novel "I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street" derived from Garner's cry "I can't breathe". When he adds to his title "A Killing on Bay Street", he means that he is not dead of a given disease but mainly of white American police officers' hatred for him as a black person on the American soil. These forms of Blacks' killing are recurrent in the United States. For, like Garner, on August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was also killed by the American police for the simple reason that he, as a black man, was not allowed to whistle at a white lady: *"Without doing anything special, a black American man known by the name of Michael Brown has lost his life because of Whites' brutality on Blacks. This fact does reflect the past of this nation, because the white policeman is protected"*⁷. What one may find too shocking and incredible about this black American's death is the fact that the white policeman who shot him dead was not considered as a murderer. For, Whites argued that he simply wanted to defend himself, and that there was nothing wrong in acting like that. This argument received a considerable attention all over the world and sparked a vigorous debate about law enforcement's relationship with Blacks in the United States. Similarly, on May 25, 2020, another black American named George Floyd lost his life in almost the same conditions as those of Eric Garner whose utterance "I can't breathe" is reproduced by George Floyd shouting in pain:

Throughout his arrest, Floyd said "I can't breathe" more than twenty times. The officers can be heard telling him to "relax", and that he was doing "fine" and "talking fine". At one point, as Floyd insisted they were going to kill him, officer Dereck Chauvin shouted. Then stop talking, stop yelling, it takes a heck of a lot of oxygen to talk⁸.

This passage evidences the American police violence through the use of chokehold over George Floyd who stands as the embodiment of all Blacks who suffer the white man's racist system. For, both Blacks, Eric Garner in the novel and George Floyd are innocently killed by the police. What the reader does not understand is how the American police continue to perpetuate such forms of violence against Blacks many years after their acceptance as equal citizens in the United States:

Police chokeholds had been partially banned in New York since 1985, when officers were

instructed only to use them in a life-threatening situation. Then in 1993, after a twenty-one-year Queens's man named Federico Pereira died of "traumatic asphyxia" after being choked by chokeholds with no exceptions (ICB: AKBS, p. 150).

One notices that the term "chokehold" is viewed as illegal or unlawful. Then, using it as a way to take someone's life is therefore a crime. Unfortunately, many years after the banning of these forms of brutality by the New York Police Department in 1985, the same facts are reproduced in 1993 and on July 17, 2014 by Pantaleo against Eric Garner. It is worth recalling that the utterance "I can't breathe" was first pronounced by Annan Ibrahim three months before Garner's death. He was, according to the novel, quietly arrested on April 2, 2014 by the New York Police Officers who accused him of possessing "a zip lock bag of marijuana" (ICB: AKBS, p. 3) and "holding a lighter and an aerosol" (ICB: AKBS, p. 5). These accusations attest of white Americans' will to victimize their black counterparts in a country to which they also stand as natives because born and grown up in it. This implies that Blacks are not free in the United States, for Whites do their best to prevent them from enjoying the full fruition of the American democracy.

What is true is that when Abraham Lincoln freed Blacks through the declaration of their Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, many Whites found it difficult to cohabite with them. They did not appreciate the fact of seeing Blacks free. Consequently, many of them found it better to create accusations on them on the behalf of the law as a way to perpetuate their enslavement in the a land ruled by Whites. This means that the accusations made on Eric Garner and Annan Ibrahim in Matt Taibbi's novel evidence the author's reconstruction of historical incidents of the American nation. The quotation below, for example, shows how Annan Ibrahim is viewed as the precursor of the famous utterance "I can't breathe": "In his panic he felt himself losing air and spoke three words destined to become famous in another man's mouth. "I can't breathe" (...) "I'm serious. I can't breathe" (ICB: AKBS, p. 3). One easily understands that Annan Ibrahim has trouble breathing while being brutalized by the American police officers who refuse to hear his cry despite his pleading for innocence. What the author shows through Erick Garner with reference to his death is the way all Blacks are victimized in the white man's world. The United States which is described within its constitution as the land of liberty and equality, is unfortunately portrayed in *I Can't Breathe: A Killing On Bay Street*, as the greatest purveyor of violence against its own black inhabitants whose complaints to white authorities appear as "a simple claim for their American citizenship, because it has not met their demands due to their blackness" (N'zambi-Mikoulou: 2020, 56). This violence is exactly what Martin Luther King considers as "a system of a far deeper malady within the American spirit" (King: 1967, 41). Similarly, a black soldier in John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, calls the white man's great nation "the United Snakes of America" (Killens: 1963, 87) because of white Americans' wrongful attitude towards black soldiers fighting alongside with them to defend the United States which is their common heritage.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this analysis, I have discovered that Matt Taibbi's *I Can't Breathe: A Killing On Bay Street* is a "biofiction", that is an account of a real-life character named Eric Garner whose name and sequences of life are shared by its protagonist. The author has incorporated actual-historical facts such as Eric Garner's marriage with Essaw, his dwelling address, sickness,

persecutions, and death to evidence the historical dimension of his narrative. In fact, the inclusion of the American cities, laws, police, and violence against Eric Garner who is most of the time arrested by white American officers pretending to have caught him with drug, are conceptual tools that establish not only the similarity between the historical Garner and the fictitious one, but also the intertwining between history and fiction in *I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street*. I confess that Matt Taibbi has really succeeded in fulfilling one the novelist's tasks which consists in inserting history into a work of fiction, for the protagonist's sequences of life intertwine with those of the real-life Eric Garner.

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