Nicholas Rinehart Can’t Breathe

On Élie and Eric

The Montagne plantation on the island of Martinique was founded in 1810 by two brothers for the harvest and refinery of sugar. One of the brothers, Saint-Catherine Clauzet, shared with his slaves the toils and duties of the plantation. He relied especially on the assistance of skilled foreman Jean-Baptiste and expert refiner Élie. When Clauzet died in 1839, his son-in-law Marie-Louis-Joseph Havre assumed complete control of Montagne, initiating his own reign of terror.

When the plantation’s sugar crop began to spoil, Havre blamed Élie. The refiner was confined in shackles to the garret of a plantation building—later to be joined by Jean-Baptiste and an enslaved woman named Angèle—where he died of deprivation soon thereafter. Both Jean-Baptiste and Angèle gave witness testimony against Havre when their illegal confinement and torture came under investigation years later. The official report of Judge Hardouin’s inquest was reprinted in the second volume of L’Histoire de l’esclavage pendant les deux dernières années, published by French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher in 1847.

Jean-Baptiste recalled Élie’s dying moments thus: “Élie, feeling about to die, asked for nothing but water; but I didn’t have any to give him; he suffered greatly from thirst. I saw him take our jug, I heard him breathe the freshness from the jar, but it didn’t have any water.” Angèle, too, echoed this image: “Élie asked, several times, for a little water; none was brought to him. He brought to his lips his water jug, there was nothing inside and he breathed it like that!”

Any glimpse of Eric Garner’s quick murder immediately recalls Élie’s death. In the brief moment that Eric gasps desperately for breath and reaches out his tensed hand, Élie grasps in vain for the empty water jug—the two images superimposed like a photographic mishap.

It may seem an epic trudge separating Élie and Eric. Yet no matter the great distance between, time has a way of snapping it shut. Past and present coil in history’s brutal warp.