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## **Imagining Margaret Garner: The Tragic Life of an American Woman**

By Cecilia M. Smith

*Abstract: There is limited information on the life of the nineteenth-century female slave with most details compiled from the narratives of well-known women such as Sojourner Truth. Professor Erlene Stetson and other historians argue that scholars treat slavery as a male phenomenon and the female is merely looked upon as a breeder, while noted African-American activist Angela Davis calls for a more accurate portrayal to debunk derogatory myths. This paper addresses the issue of image with the argument that the enslaved African-American woman possessed no image of her own. It focuses on the story of a runaway female slave named Margaret Garner, who chose to murder one of her children rather than return that child to the bonds of slavery. She gained international attention, but quickly disappeared from history. The story of Garner as a slave, fugitive, resistor and heroine were all images of one woman realized through the notion of others; her story required a twentieth-century author, Toni Morrison, to revive her memory. Image plays an important part in how people, places and events are regarded. A new wave of historians has ignited a revolution of study on the still developing image of the African-American female slave, with the goal of employing new methods of thinking and research to form coherent conclusions.*

## **Introduction**

In 1856, in a tiny cabin on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio, a small group of frightened slaves, fugitives from Kentucky, were appreciating their last few moments of freedom. The group consisted of four adults and four young children. In time their owner arrived to recapture them under the authority of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Before they could be remanded into custody, one of the fugitives murdered one of the children and prepared to kill the other children as well.

The arrest of a slave for murder would not have been an unusual occurrence, nor would it have drawn much interest for anyone other than those involved. However, this fugitive slave was the mother of the slain child. Curiosity was sparked, and the trials and tribulations of the woman, Margaret Garner, drew nationwide attention. After the arrest, free blacks and even white Ohioans called for the immediate release of Margaret and her family. The court proceedings lasted several weeks, and each day the courtroom was completely filled. None of the attendees were black.

During her lifetime, Margaret Garner was celebrated in poetry. Newspaper articles heralded and besmirched her character. A few years after her death, she was depicted in paint. Then her story was seemingly lost. Recently, Garner's life was re-imagined in present day through a novel by a Pulitzer Prize winning author, and a critically acclaimed opera. But what made her story so engrossing? And why was she lost to history?

The chronicle of Margaret Garner is immediately compelling. Faced with the prospect that a slave mother would kill her own child, abolitionists in the free state of Ohio attempted to use sympathy for Margaret's situation to force a reconsideration of the evils of slavery. The courtroom battle over jurisdiction exemplified the issue of state versus federal rights in a precursor to the Civil War itself. Furthermore, it brought to light the sexual abuses that female slaves suffered at the hands of their masters. All of these factors fashioned a sensationalized image of one enslaved female, but not an image of the African-American woman. The enslaved African-American woman possessed no image of her own. The ideals of slavery, fugitive laws and abolitionist movements were all greater concepts than that of an enslaved female. It was not the image of Margaret Garner – the woman,

mother, and murderess – who sensationalized this case, but the circumstances of slavery and the political issues of a nation that were at the forefront. The image of Margaret Garner, created in the nineteenth century, was one that was realized through the notions of others, and required a twentieth-century woman to revive her memory.

### ***Historiography***

The historical implications of Margaret Garner's story have found relevance and importance in contemporary ideals. Revived after over a century by Toni Morrison – Pulitzer Prize winner and Nobel Prize for Literature recipient – in her fictionalized novel, *Beloved*,<sup>1</sup> Margaret's story brought new light to the limited history of enslaved females. A new wave of historical studies ignited a revolution on the status of the African-American woman.

Throughout history, image has played an important part in how people, places and events are regarded. Image is often marred by perception and prejudice. While individuals are free to make their own private judgments, they frequently fall into the trap of the mob mentality. They are often influenced by public opinion, which has been molded by media outlets, literature and misinformation. Accurate individual opinions rarely become a matter of historical record. Image has consumed the twenty-first century with a constant bombardment of technology for immediate gratification. Image was also a significant factor during the nineteenth century with specific depictions of women that have lasted through the centuries.

Forced to contend with a scarcity of documentation, historians have traditionally been able to construct only limited theories surrounding the image of African-American women as slaves. What has been gleaned about women was usually found in narratives of the more well-known female slaves that escaped their condition, such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman or Harriet Jacob. The image of the enslaved African-American woman began with an explanation of her perceived purpose.

Professor Erlene Stetson describes the overarching image and purpose of the female slave in an essay entitled, "Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the

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<sup>1</sup>Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, Inc., 1987).

Black Female Slave.” She argues that it is society that has neglected the study of women, and as a consequence, has consigned women’s experiences during slavery to the locked history vault with a limited amount of information inside. Stetson draws attention to how historians traditionally viewed the female slave. She writes, “scholars treat the slavery experience as a black male phenomenon, regarding black women as biological functionaries whose destinies are rendered ephemeral – to lay their eggs and die.”<sup>2</sup> In essence, this argument mirrors what happened to the history of the African-American female slave. The institution of slavery existed, but knowledge of the role women played died with its extinction.

The theories that were developed from the studies of the institution of slavery did not demonstrate knowledge of the African-American female slave. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips was one of the leading historians to first theorize about the institution of slavery. His work became a standard in historical studies for decades.<sup>3</sup> As a professor of Southern history he brought his knowledge of the south and slavery to numerous students. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, herself a professor of Southern history, in her article on historians from Yale University, writes that Phillips’ work was an intellectual effort to justify the white southern political revolution of the 1890s that denied African-Americans the right to vote, segregated them, and relegated them to the lowest rungs of society. His theories would justify white supremacy.<sup>4</sup> Phillips was biased. His interpretations of slavery and African-Americans gave way to his own prejudiced conclusions rather than providing accurate information on the lives of the slaves, either male or female.

Gilmore argues that Phillips had his own agenda. Her conclusions support an argument that from the beginning of historical documentation slave images have been distorted. As there had not been a significant amount of information on female

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<sup>2</sup> Erlene Stetson, “Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave,” *But Some of Us Are Brave: All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men*, ed. Gloria T. Hull et al. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1982), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, “Which Southerners? Which Southern Historians? A Century of Teaching Southern History at Yale,” *The Yale Review* 99, no. 1 (December 22, 2010): 61.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

slaves, their image was even less relevant in historians' eyes than their male counterparts.

Perhaps in history's eye the female slave was less relevant than the male, however, many women in today's society are finding their footing and speaking out for women everywhere. One such woman is African-American activist Angela Davis who came to the forefront in the late sixties. Though she presented a radical image of the African-American woman, she attempted to bring a new voice to the plight of the civil rights movement. A noted scholar, Davis writes about the role of the female slave. Her essay, written from prison in 1971, was notable for the attention it brought to the image of the black female slave. Davis recognizes the lack of study necessary to understand what constituted the woman's role in slavery. She calls for an accurate portrait of the African woman in bondage to debunk the myth of the matriarchate, one of the images attached to the female slave.<sup>5</sup> Davis argues that black women slaves were equal to their male counterparts; however, they were not given an equal voice in history.<sup>6</sup> Davis' voice was relevant during a time of revolution over civil and feminist rights, calling for an acknowledgement of not only blacks and females, but also the black female. It was an attempt to create a better image of women.

Depictions of African-American female slaves were derogatory and persistent. Historical images of black women in the form of Mammy or Jezebel, have lasted throughout the centuries and still maintain an impact on the image of black women today. The Jezebel image is that of an overly sexualized black woman who made it easy for the white plantation owner to justify rape. Psychotherapist Carolyn M. West describes the Jezebel image as seductive and hypersexual. She tended to be portrayed as a mixed-race woman with more European features, such as thin lips, straight hair, and a slender nose; quite the opposite of the Mammy image, which was the depiction of a bandana clad, obese, dark complexioned woman with African features, and completely asexual.<sup>7</sup> West argues that the impact of these historical images, in

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Massachusetts Review Inc.* 13, nos. 1/2 (Winter-Spring): 82.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>7</sup> Carolyn M. West, "Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women and Their Implications for Psychotherapy," *Psychotherapy* 32, no. 3 (1995): 460-61.

the form of Mammy or Jezebel, has lasted throughout the centuries; they continue to impact the image of the African-American woman today. Her theories remain important as a historical reference, as the images of black women are media controlled and persist in controversy, in light of the numerous degrading images still seen on television and in print.

Just as television and print media are relevant, another area of study that requires evaluation of images is in the realm of literature. Rupe Simms in her article on images and literature argues that slave owners were an influence in a number of literary realms, from religious tracts to natural science, which produced specific controlling images of the African-American female slave.<sup>8</sup> Simms used over 300 examples of literary sources. The sources were studied for their images of the stereotypical Mammy and Jezebel. She concludes that six realms of literature reflected the dominant ideology generally, and the controlling images specifically. Ideology was white supremacy and white paternalism, while the images were the Mammies and Jezebels. Specifically, Simms finds that these images were justified in the literature. One example she quotes was from religious tracts, which included biblical scriptures interpreting African-American females as Jezebels and describes the Negro woman as the worst woman ever heard of in the annals of mankind. Simms concludes that from intellectuals to novelists there was an agenda to influence literature, which would further exacerbate the image of the African-American female slave, and subordinate these women in every eye.<sup>9</sup> It is a relevant study even in today's society. So much of what is seen and heard comes from information presented by the media, be it film, television or print. The images that women, particularly young black women, are bombarded with continue to perpetuate ignorant and demeaning stereotypes. With this, it becomes necessary to understand the purpose behind ideologies.

While scientists and ministers were using literature to defend ideologies of slavery, so too were abolitionists found fictionalizing stories to convert readers to the antislavery cause. In her article, "The Blade Was in My Own Breast: Slave Infanticide in 1850s Fiction," Sarah N. Roth discusses strategies that fiction writers used to gain sympathy for their cause. She writes that the

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<sup>8</sup> Rupe Simms, "Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women," *Gender & Society* 15, no. 6 (December 2001): 882.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 884-886.

authors confronted strong cultural beliefs about femininity, motherhood, and blackness. In order to make their cause acceptable to the white population these writers would take a tragedy, such as infanticide, lighten the skin of the main character, endow their character with an aggressiveness, and present the killing of the child as a form of suicide.<sup>10</sup> Several authors released publications featuring enslaved female characters that killed their own children. Roth acknowledges that some historians wrote about the importance of gender in considering infanticide, however, they did not come close to considering the impact. The article supports the idea that even white abolitionists, who were purported to be against slavery, felt the image of the black woman was insufficient to present as a cause. It needed to be doctored in order to gain acceptance.

Darlene Clark Hine points out this early racism stating that, “the experiences of Sara Mapps Douglass [black female abolitionist] are a revealing commentary on the racism that existed among white women in the antislavery movement. When Douglass attempted to attend the national meeting of the Female Anti-Slavery Convention in New York City in 1837, she learned that ‘colored members were unwelcome’.”<sup>11</sup> The white women congregated under the guise of a noble cause; however, their actions spoke louder than their proposed intentions. With the exclusion of black women, their convention appeared to be more akin to a social gathering rather than a political action committee. This reveals that racism had a substantial impact even amongst those who were supposedly strongly opposed to slavery.

Racism was an issue for the African American female slave; however, it was not the only issue that these women faced. The institution of slavery saw no significance for the female slave; the female slave was invisible. Deborah Gray White, in her book, *Ar’n’t I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, modifies the notion that female slaves were an insignificant part of slave history. She writes, “Slave women were everywhere yet nowhere.”<sup>12</sup> With one statement she sums up the status of the

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah N. Roth, “The Blade was in My Own Breast: Slave Infanticide in 1850s Fiction,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 8, no. 2 (June 2007): 169.

<sup>11</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (New York: Carlson Publishing), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 23.

female slave – everywhere in slave society, lost in history. This argument is an echo of history following the words of activist Davis before her. Davis stated, “in order to function as a slave the black woman had to be annulled as a woman.”<sup>13</sup> White provides an intimate image of the black female slave that was groundbreaking in its study. Her introduction sets the stage for conversation. White draws out the historical debates about the image of the male slave, specifically the “Sambo” image, which is a derogatory racial term used to portray black men as dimwitted, humble and happy-go-lucky. It was this image that historians used to define the image of the female slave. The introduction is also powerful for what it did not include, and that is specifics about the female slave. White’s book began the debate over how the African-American female slaves were studied, and was the forerunner for more in-depth investigation into the fragmented documentation of their plantation life.

Hine continues the debate on the development of the image of the female slave in her review of the theses of several prominent historians. Her article looks at the progress that has been made in the study of African-American female slaves. Hine praises White for her groundbreaking work. She introduces seven volumes of material of which she argues further enhances White’s studies. She specifically examines each chapter and presents a more exacting study by historians.

Hine’s argument centers on the impact of White’s book on future historians and includes a discussion of the limited amount of information that is available. An introduction to a second contribution from White emphasizes the difficulties encountered when attempting to locate sources. Hine writes, “she gave future scholars advance warning about the need to knit fragments of data together to craft sophisticated arguments grounded in solid theoretical frameworks in order to bridge the structural limitations of inadequate sources.”<sup>14</sup> Hine’s article further enforces the idea that the image of the black female slave is one that is still developing and requires new methods of thinking and research in order to form coherent conclusions.

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<sup>13</sup> Davis, *The Massachusetts Review, Inc.*, 87.

<sup>14</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, “‘Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South’: Twenty Years After, Women Slavery and Historical Research,” *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 15.

Studies continue that bring hope for more information about the lives of female slaves, and Jessica Millward paints a more relevant picture of African-American women's history. In her article entitled, "More History Than Myth: African-American Women's History Since the Publication of *Ar'n't I A Woman?*," she argues that White's book, while centering around slavery, was a work that advocated scholarship on current issues such as racism, feminism and violence; all are topics that are germane to any discussion on African-American women today, with domestic violence as a central theme. This article shows that there is a progressive move towards understanding African-American women as a result of historical studies. Millward writes, "Discussions of African-American women's nearly four-hundred-year existence in what became the United States reach back into the colonial era and rush forward into the twenty-first century."<sup>15</sup> Because of this, the enslaved African-American woman's image is beginning to be defined.

Image has far reaching implications. As seen through the eyes of historians it can shape or destroy. Image, for the African American female slave, was a strong factor that had a great impact on how these women were viewed. It dictated attitudes and ensured that they remained subservient. Long lasting effects have reverberated through time and continue to be a factor for the image of the black woman today. In the case of Margaret Garner image was everything.

### ***Imagining Margaret Garner***

One hundred and fifty four years ago, an American woman named Margaret Garner died from typhoid fever.<sup>16</sup> Her death closed a tiny chapter in the history of slavery, relegating her to the annals of old newspaper offices, an artist's canvas, and a few remnant memories. While the events of her life had gained international attention, with an unusual trial that lasted for weeks, she quickly disappeared from the forefront of history, replaced by women like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. It was not until author Toni Morrison

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<sup>15</sup> Jessica Millward, "More History than Myth: African-American Women's History Since the Publication of *'Ar'n't I a Woman?*," *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 162.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 277-278.

resurrected her story that the memory of Margaret was revived. But who was Margaret Garner? Why then did she fade into obscurity? The answers lie in the images that created this woman and her history.

### ***Margaret as Slave***

It is necessary to understand the slave society in which Margaret Garner resided in order to understand the image of the woman as a slave. There are many forms of slavery, ranging from chattel to sexual. The slave society that was America in the nineteenth century was an institution that deprived people of their heritage, their freedom, placed them under generational ownership as property, and forced them into service for the profit of said owners. As much as slavery from this era was about labor, it was also about the degradation and denigration of a people, ensuring that they were sufficiently subjugated in order to maintain necessary control over the millions who were enslaved. The auction block, chains, whips, slave quarters, and cotton are terms that alone do not constitute a definition for the period of antebellum slavery in the nineteenth century. They do, however, remain prominent in the memory as images of suffering and injustice.

There are limited resources detailing the daily life of the enslaved African American woman. All women were deemed second-class citizens, subservient to the male; the enslaved African American woman would rank even lower. Narratives from prominent women such as Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Tubman reveal a closer look into their daily lives. It is, however, the words of Sojourner Truth in her speech, *Ar'n't I A Woman?* at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, which offers a brutal perspective into life on the plantation: "Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much as a man... and bear the lash as well."<sup>17</sup> Sojourner's speech provides insight into the workload of the enslaved woman. While her duties may or may not have been different than those of her male counterpart, it is quite clear from Truth's speech that her enslavement was comparable and no less important.

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<sup>17</sup> Internet Modern History Sourcebook, "Sojourner Truth, '*Ar'n't I A Woman?*,'" (December, 1851), accessed November 8, 2012. [www.fordham.edu/halsall.mod/sojtruth-woman.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall.mod/sojtruth-woman.asp).

The little that is known about Margaret Garner's life prior to the incident is gathered from the genealogical archives of the Gaines family. According to the 1850 Slave Census, she was an unnamed mulatto listed as the property of Archibald K. Gaines, residing on the Maplewood Plantation, in Richwood, Boone County, Kentucky.<sup>18</sup> Steven Weisenburger, whose research spawned the book, *Modern Medea*, does not include a detailed list of her duties; however he does indicate that Margaret was a domestic. Her duties would have included gardening, cooking, cleaning, laundering, sewing and mending, spinning and weaving.<sup>19</sup> Weisenburger also concluded that Margaret was probably wet-nurse for Archibald's second wife, Elizabeth, and would have had to abandon nursing her own children. Genealogical records indicate that Margaret's pregnancies mirrored Elizabeth's.<sup>20</sup>

The physical appearance of Margaret's children was of importance in the case, but Margaret had also been described in documents. Levi Coffin, an influential member of the Underground Railroad, provided descriptive details that begin to create a mental image. He wrote that, "[she] naturally excited much attention. She was a mulatto, about five feet high, showing one-fourth or one-third white blood. She had a high forehead, her eyebrows were finely arched and her eyes bright and intelligent, but the African appeared in the lower part of her face, in her broad nose and thick lips."<sup>21</sup> From this brief description not much can be discerned about her appearance, but as Coffin was more specific about her African features, one can only deduce that she was of a lighter complexion. These are the first images of Margaret Garner.

During this period of time slave owners chose not to understand the emotions, desires or needs of the slave, male or female. As they were thought to be savages, and residing in a system that was good for them, anything that they might have wanted or needed was simply superfluous. Frederick Douglass questioned this argument in his speech, *The Hypocrisy of American Slavery*. He asked: "What, then, remains to be argued? Is it that slavery is not divine; that God did not establish it? That which is

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Weisenburger, *Modern Medea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 39.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The American Negro, His History and Literature* (1880; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1968), 562.

inhuman cannot be divine.”<sup>22</sup> Understanding those men and women to be anything but slaves was not a consideration. Margaret was first and foremost a woman who happened to be a slave. The image that antebellum slavery created, however, was that of a slave, a piece of property with no wants or desires, and whose only concerns should have been the performance of her duties.

Slavery was not an institution that was conducive to Margaret and her family. There are many stories of fugitives and revolutionaries, finding it easier to run away or revolt, rather than face such indignities. Whatever conditions the Garner family faced, Margaret found it necessary to leave the Gaines plantation with her children, seeking freedom at all costs, and with the resolution to die before returning to the dredges of slave life.

### ***Margaret as Fugitive***

On a cold day in January 1856, Margaret and her husband along with fifteen other slaves from the Gaines and Marshall plantations escaped. Margaret’s husband, Robert, was owned by James Marshall, and resided on a plantation approximately one and one-quarter miles from the Gaines plantation.<sup>23</sup> There is no documentation on the reasons for her escape, only speculation that comes from understanding the brutality of slavery.

Weisenburger used documents and letters from the Gaines family archives to show the instability of their plantation. Archibald K. Gaines owned several hundred acres on which he raised pigs and cows. The male slaves were responsible for moving those animals to market, but also for managing the crops. Because winter had set in, there was little work, other than tending the animals, and Gaines himself was in “poor spirits.” This led to financial instability, which caused concern for the slaves.<sup>24</sup> Financial instability often led to the sale of slaves, disrupting their established family life, and tearing them apart. With the possibility that Gaines might have needed to sell his slaves in order to stabilize his business endeavors, the idea that Margaret or her children would have been sold off was likely a major concern for her.

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<sup>22</sup> The History Place, “Frederick Douglass, *The Hypocrisy of American Slavery*,” accessed November 9, 2012. [www.historyplace.com/speeches/douglass.htm](http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/douglass.htm).

<sup>23</sup> Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-44.

Another possible reason for running away could have been physical abuse from Margaret's master. Coffin provided one possible reason. He wrote that, "on the left side of her forehead was an old scar, and on the cheek-bone, on the same side, another one. When asked what caused them, she said, 'White man struck me.' That was all, but it betrays a story of cruelty and degradation, and, perhaps, gives the key-note to Margaret's hate of slavery, her revolt against its thralldom, and her resolve to die rather than go back to it."<sup>25</sup> Sojourner Truth brought to light the physical abuse that she suffered; the assumption could be made that Margaret, too, had suffered such abuse, and resolved not to see her children suffer the same lot.

A Maplewood neighbor to the Gaines' plantation seemed to imply feistiness that was inherent to Margaret, and blamed it on her father, Duke. The neighbor, Benjamin Franklin Bedinger, wrote an editorial to the *Covington Journal*, offering his opinion on why Margaret ran away. He wrote that, "Peggy [Margaret] is a very common cross tempered, flat nosed, thick lipped Negro woman whose father was a very bad character." He continued his editorial by stating that the beginning of her fury was her father's meanness and the meddling abolitionists who taught her the beautiful morality found in the higher law, and that it was noble to cut the throat of her offspring.<sup>26</sup> There is no concrete evidence of any prior escape attempts on the Gaines' plantation by Margaret or any of her family members, or any prior contact with abolitionists. Bedinger's statements amount to racist opinions, especially in the description of Margaret, but it does offer another possible scenario in which Margaret was influenced by family to run away.

Another possibility was sexual abuse. Margaret was the mother of four children, and was pregnant with her fifth child. Robert sired her first child, Thomas. The rest of her children were described as nearly white, and with no other white males on the plantation it was assumed that their father was Archibald Gaines.<sup>27</sup> Weisenburger makes this conclusion based on speculation, but acknowledges that there is no supporting documentation, rumors or otherwise to indicate who was the father of Margaret's children. Whereas Weisenburger bases his conclusion on speculation, abolitionists of the time felt they knew for sure that Margaret was

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<sup>25</sup> Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, 562.

<sup>26</sup> Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

sexually abused. Lucy Stone, a prominent white abolitionist of the day, offered her opinion as the key to the Margaret's action. She stood up to address the audience in Commissioner Pendery's court at Margaret's trial. Stone noted that, "the faded faces of the Negro children tell too plainly to what degradation female slaves submit."<sup>28</sup>

In her study of more than five hundred interviews with female ex-slaves, Thelma Jennings found that female bondage was more severe than male bondage because those women had to bear children and cope with sexual abuse in addition to doing the work assigned to them; work that was often similar in type and quantity to that of male slaves.<sup>29</sup> There is no concrete evidence or interviews with Margaret that would explain why she chose to run away. Physical or sexual abuse was a possible reason, along with ideas planted by other family members or abolitionists. What is clear is that the conditions had become unbearable enough for her to risk her own life and the lives of her children to become fugitives. Freedom lay over the frozen Ohio River, but the law would prove to bar her hopes.

### ***The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law***

As part of the Compromise of 1850, Congress enacted the Fugitive Slave Law in September 1850.<sup>30</sup> The law was a part of a compromise needed to compensate for the addition of territory won in the Mexican-American War. Politicians feared an imbalance of power would occur between an unequal number of "Northern" or "Southern" territories allowed into the union. The compromise rested upon the issue of slavery, allowing new territories to choose whether they would be free or slave states. Several years before the start of the Civil War, states' rights were already coming to the forefront and beginning to divide the union.

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Reinhardt, *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? The True Story that Inspired Toni Morrison's Beloved*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 642.

<sup>29</sup> Thelma Jennings, "'Us Colored Women Had To Go Though a Plenty': Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 3 (Winter, 1990): 46.

<sup>30</sup> "The Fugitive Slave Law and Its Victims" *Anti-Slavery Tracts*, no. 18 (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1856): 1.

Several issues were addressed along with the compromise, one of which was the issue of the fugitive slave. Millard Fillmore, acting President of the United States, approved the Fugitive Slave Law, generally attributed to James M. Mason, a senator from Virginia.<sup>31</sup> In short, the law allowed and compelled anyone to pursue a fugitive slave by seizure, warrant or arrest, and take that person before a judge or commissioner in order to return him or her to the state or territory from whence they came. It also addressed the penalties for persons obstructing the arrest, or the harboring and concealing of a fugitive slave.<sup>32</sup>

The Fugitive Slave Law was harsh for all concerned. The *New York Evening Post* called it “an act for the encouragement of kidnapping.”<sup>33</sup> No one could refuse to assist anyone attempting to recover a slave. Any free African-American could be accused of being a slave and would not be able to offer testimony to defend him or herself in a court of law. This was the law that granted Archibald K. Gaines and James Marshall authority to follow the trail of their runaway slaves to return them to the state of Kentucky.

### ***Margaret as Resistance***

In total seventeen slaves would make their escape from the Gaines and Marshall plantations. Of those, nine made it through to Canada, while Margaret and her group were holed up in Ohio. It would not take long for Archibald K. Gaines and Thomas Marshall (son of owner James Marshall) to establish a posse in order to capture their runaway slaves. On January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1856, the Garner family waited in a cabin belonging to the Kite family, distant relatives, and the midpoint for their journey on to the Underground Railroad.<sup>34</sup> After warrants had been sworn out, according to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and surveillance had been conducted, the Garner family of fugitives was finally confronted.

The act of running away was a common form of resistance. There are, however, many other forms that slaves take in order to free themselves from the confines of slavery. Everyday resistance amounted to work slowdowns, feigning illnesses, breaking tools,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>34</sup> Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, 63.

religious practices, and manumission. Some, mostly women, practiced “truancy” which was a form of running away temporarily from overwork and abuse on the plantation.<sup>35</sup> Historian Mary Ellison theorizes that black women sought and fought every means possible of resisting the cruelty and inhumanity of a system that matched economic profit with racial control. They often succeeded in making an intolerable institution more bearable and they evolved subversive techniques that were varied and devious enough quite frequently to make a mockery of the system itself.<sup>36</sup> At the extreme end of resistance is death.

The story of resistance, and the image of Margaret, is outlined in the *Enquirer*, a prominent Cincinnati paper partial to defense of the Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>37</sup> Inserted into the title of the *Enquirer* article were the words, “A Tale of Horror!” and the ending exclamation, “Great Excitement!” The article itself details the particulars of the case, reporting the fugitives’ activities before they were encountered at the Kite cabin. Of great importance in this article is the description of the scene in which Margaret herself was confronted. The following excerpt was written in the *Enquirer*:

But a deed of horror had been consummated, for weltering in its blood, the throat being cut from ear to ear and the head almost severed from the body, upon the floor lay one of the children of the younger couple, a girl three years old, while in a back room, crouched beneath the bed, two more of the children, boys, of two and five years, were moaning, the one having received two gashes in its throat, the other a cut upon the head. As the party [slave catchers] entered the room, the mother was seen wielding a heavy shovel, and before she could be secured she inflicted a heavy blow with it upon the face of the infant, which was lying upon the floor.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Stephanie M. H Camp, “‘I Could Not Stay There’: Enslaved Women, Truancy and the Geography of Everyday Forms of Resistance in the Antebellum Plantation South,” *Slavery and Abolition* 23, no. 3 (2002): 3.

<sup>36</sup> Mary Ellison, “Resistance to Oppression: Black Women’s Response to Slavery in the United States,” *Slavery and Abolition* 4, no. 1 (1983): 56-58.

<sup>37</sup> Reinhardt, *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?*, 731.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 747-756.

The paper also included two opinion statements, which showed how the parents of the infant were viewed. In the eyes of abolitionists they were regarded as hero and heroine, who would rather imbue their hands in the blood of their offspring than allow them to wear the shackles of slavery. Others looked upon them as brutal and unnatural murderers.<sup>39</sup>

A second newspaper source, the *Cincinnati Columbia* – political leaning unknown but seemed to favor the fugitives – also reported the incident, though some of the details were not entirely accurate. Its title, “Horrible Affair! Desperate Resistance! A Child Slain by its Mother!” acknowledged that the mother did indeed slay the child, but reported the child as male instead of female. This paper also reported that a glance into an adjoining room revealed a Negro woman holding in her hand a knife literally dripping with gore over the heads of two little Negro children, who were crouched to the floor and uttering the cries whose agonized peals had first startled them.<sup>40</sup> Clearly the scene in the room was horrific as evidenced by the gory details provided in both articles, but the second paper actually defines her deed as resistance. The first paper did not use the specific word “resistance,” but it was not a necessary addition to convey the idea.

Margaret’s decision to kill her child became a very public matter. In order to keep them from returning to slavery she demonstrated the greatest form of resistance. Newspaper articles of the day, whether sympathetic with her deed, or horrified, show a discrepancy in reporting; both papers demonstrate bias, and were more interested in the gore factor, rather than answering the question of why this crime occurred. Because of this tactic, the newspapers effectively created an image of Margaret that was nothing more than a knife and shovel-wielding murderess, and set the nation eagerly awaiting more details.

### ***Margaret as Heroine***

After her arrest Margaret gained support from abolitionists. Praised in poetry and lauded in song, hers was a story steeped in tragedy, a beacon exposing the atrocities of slavery, and a catalyst for abolitionists to espouse anti-slavery jargon. One of the more prominent activists was African-American, Frances Ellen Watkins

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 756-773.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 794.

Harper. She used poetry to showcase Margaret's story, and revealed her to be a tragic heroine.

Harper first came to prominence as an abolitionist lecturer and poet during the 1850s.<sup>41</sup> Her poem entitled, "The Slave Mother: A Tale of the Ohio," was written as an homage to Margaret and her tragic situation. This was the second poem dedicated to the slave mother; however, her first poem brought light to the separation of mother and child. Harper's poems were mostly written in the classic rhyming form of a quatrain. The sixteen stanza poem relates the story opening with the line, "I have but four, the treasures of my soul." Right away Harper draws attention to Margaret's status as a mother and demonstrates her love for her children. Harper laments slavery as the cruel hand that would rip the slave from her children. The poem continues the tale, detailing the escape, the brief glimpse of freedom, the slave catchers on their trail, and the issue of the free state of Ohio not being able to save them. Harper calls Margaret a heroic mother, setting the stage to gather sympathy for the tragic deed. As the poem ends, Harper cries out for justice, against treacherous slavery, and for men and Christians to stand on the side of freedom.<sup>42</sup>

Harper used her talents to paint a glowing and honorable image of Margaret, deeming her heroic, brave, and essentially blameless in her deed because of her situation. While Harper's poem purports to endorse sympathy for Margaret, it has an underlying rhetoric for an abolitionist agenda, and therefore has a dualistic meaning. She has portrayed Margaret in the image of a heroine whose love was so great for her children, and slavery so reviled, that she needed to kill them. There is no indication that Harper ever met Margaret, but she, like other writers of the period, used a tragic situation to speak out against the injustices of slavery. This is not to discount the heroic work Harper and abolitionists engaged in the freeing of the enslaved. It is only to show that abolitionists also sought the most tragic and horrific events to showcase the atrocities inflicted. In doing so they created an image

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<sup>41</sup> Eric. L. Haralson and John Hollander, ed., "Frances E. W. Harper," *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century* (Illinois: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), 184.

<sup>42</sup> Frances E. W. Harper, *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, ed. Maryemma Graham, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1988), 28-31.

of heroic, and sometimes blameless, men and women who fit into a generalized abolitionist agenda, not specific to that of a woman in a slave society who had to resort to murder.

### ***Margaret as Conflict***

From the warrants issued for the arrest of the fugitives, to the battle in court over which authority had jurisdiction, the newspapers of the day recorded the proceedings. At issue was whether the state of Ohio had jurisdiction over Margaret to try her for capital murder, or whether the state of Kentucky had jurisdiction because of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law.

The *Cincinnati Columbian* reported that a writ of *habeas corpus* was produced requiring the fugitives to be brought forth and deputies to show just why they made the arrest.<sup>43</sup> This paper produced several articles that were specific to the proceedings, discussing the jurisdiction issue.

Meanwhile, the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, which was considered an anti-slavery paper, seemed to support the Garner case. Two of its entries, from January 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>, 1856, are the only documents that concern themselves with the fugitives and their wellbeing.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, the *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* from January 31, 1856, reported on the legal maneuvers. Extra deputies were paid to control the growing crowds outside.<sup>45</sup>

One important aspect from the trial came from an affidavit for Margaret, reported by the *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*. The abolitionist lawyers who were defending the fugitives presented evidence that Margaret had been taken into the city of Cincinnati by John Gaines, Archibald K. Gaines' father, and his wife Eliza when she was a young child.<sup>46</sup> This was an important issue because it was validation that the Gaines family had taken their slaves into a free state.

The Garner's lawyer, John Jolliffe, was knowledgeable in his defense of fugitives. His main argument was that slavery was a sin. He used biblical passages to argue his points, and hoped to

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<sup>43</sup> Reinhardt, *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?*, 828.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 834.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 933.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 950.

sway the court's opinion against the Fugitive Slave Law.<sup>47</sup> Jolliffe also argued that since Margaret had been voluntarily taken into a free state, she was now free. He claimed that, "the maxim of the law was 'once free always free.'"<sup>48</sup> If this were proved true, Margaret was already free; and if Margaret was free, so too were her children.

The Garner trial lasted for several weeks. In the end Archibald K. Gaines and the state of Kentucky were victorious. Commissioner Pendery offered the final ruling. His conclusion stated that while Gaines voluntarily took his slaves to the free state of Ohio, the slave voluntarily abandoned freedom by returning to Kentucky. He continued: "The question is not one of humanity that I am called upon to decide. The laws of Kentucky and of the United States make it *a question of property*."<sup>49</sup>

The legal wrangling of states' rights versus federal rights in this case was a precursor to the issues that arose at the start of the Civil War. Margaret as a slave was not allowed to testify for herself according to the Fugitive Slave Law, and was therefore not a viable participant in the proceedings. Coffin described her demeanor in the courtroom stating, "she would look up occasionally, for an instant, with a timid, apprehensive glance as the strange faces around her, but her eyes were generally cast down."<sup>50</sup> Margaret, seated with her children, was the image of a tragic figure, caught up in the conflict.

### ***Margaret as Art***

Artist Thomas Satterwhite Noble in his piece entitled, *The Modern Medea, 1867*, depicted Margaret's image in art.<sup>51</sup> Completed eleven years after the Cincinnati incident, Noble's painting was a re-imagining of the scene in the room in which the fugitive and her dead child were found.

Thomas Satterwhite Noble (1835-1907) was the son of a prominent slave owning family from Kentucky. He studied art in France, fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War, and

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<sup>47</sup> Weisenburger, 100-101.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>50</sup> Coffin, 563.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Satterwhite Noble, *The Modern Medea, 1867*.

subsequently took up slavery as the subject in his main series of work.<sup>52</sup> For this particular piece he created two pencil sketches and two painted versions, of which the first was lost. The final 20" x 16" canvas was completed in oil (Figure 1).

Noble's painting depicts a cloistered room in which fugitive Margaret Garner is standing to the right, and a group of four men (authorities) are standing across from her. Two young children cling to her in desperation. Lying on the floor is the body of a child, its blood pooled beneath its head as the adults in the room look on with horror. Lost in the shadows of the floor and its mother's dress is the body of another child face down on the ground.

Noble was not present during the Cincinnati incident, so it would appear that he needed to rely on newspaper renditions and word of mouth to fashion this painting. The artist has manipulated history to fit his conception of the scene. The young child on the floor is a boy, appearing to be 5-6 years old. The children and Margaret all possess darkened complexions. Nowhere is there evidence of the knife that was used in the crime.

Noble's painting brings the viewer directly into the middle of the action just after the fugitives have been discovered. Browns, greens, and black dominate the color palate, creating an overarching darkness that becomes an allegory not only for the darkness of the institution of slavery, but also for the slaves themselves, as the light of freedom had now slipped away. Though intricately painted it lacks vibrant hues, except for the red blood on the floor and in the headscarf worn by Margaret. The red is a reminder of the violent pain that is not only evident in the room, but also in the everyday lives of the slaves. Small hints of red on one of the men, presumably Archibald K. Gaines, suggest a collusion of sorts in the crime itself. The other men are staring and pointing at the child on the floor, while Gaines has directed his anger at Margaret, gazing fiercely at her across the room. Margaret does not cower, staring back at him and challenging his authority. She is drawing attention to the dead child and almost seems to be blaming him.

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<sup>52</sup> Leslie Furth, "'The Modern Medea' and Race Matters: Thomas Satterwhite Noble's Margaret Garner," *American Art* 12, no. 2 (Summer, 1998): 37.

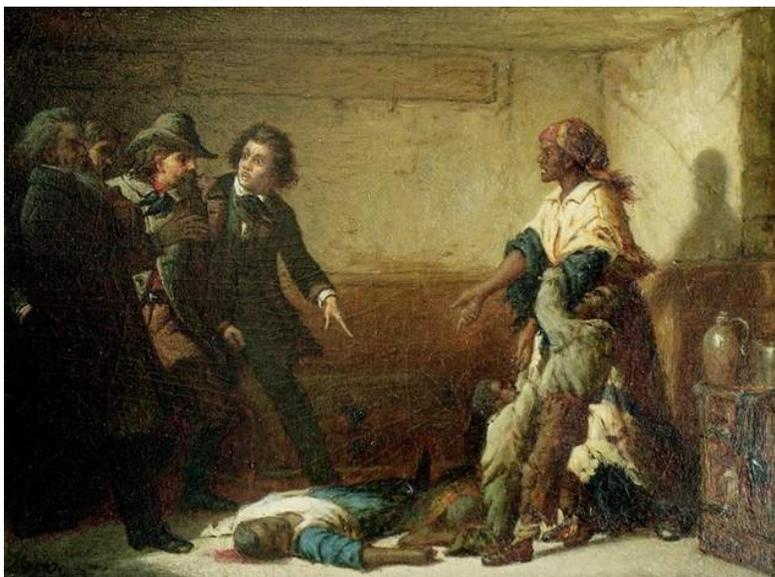


Figure 1: Thomas Satterwhite Noble, *The Modern Medea*, 1867.

At first glance it is unclear exactly who was responsible for the deceased children on the ground. Margaret stands outnumbered with her hands outstretched, bloodless, guiltless, palms facing upwards, bemoaning her fate. She seems innocent, filled with wonderment at what has taken place.

While there is only speculation as to why Noble would choose slavery as his subject, there is no indication that he had an abolitionist's agenda. There are some historians who have concluded that Noble might be atoning for the sins of his slave-owning father. Others have implied that Noble's work was a stepping-stone for his own career advancement.<sup>53</sup> Leslie Furth, art historian, writes that Noble was elected to the National Academy of Design based on the strength of this painting.<sup>54</sup>

Conceding that all artists have the right to artistic license, Noble portrayed Margaret Garner in a manner that served his purpose rather than hers. An in-depth, close-up examination of the main character reveals a face contorted in anger. Margaret's eyes are exaggerated, perhaps to show shock or horror, however this technique has the opposite effect. She instead possesses a crazed

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<sup>53</sup> Jo-Ann Morgan, "Thomas Satterwhite Noble's Mulattos: From Barefoot Madonna to Maggie the Ripper," *Journal of American Studies* 41, no. 1 (April 2007): 84.

<sup>54</sup> Leslie Furth, *American Art*, 37.

appearance. Her face is harsh with sharp angles at her nose, brow and chin. She is painted with a dark complexion, and her clothes are slightly tattered.

This image of Margaret leaves an indelible image of the African-American female slave as angry and crazed. Noble has revealed his stereotypes and prejudices in his imagination of Margaret on canvas, perhaps recalling his own plantation experiences. He has also forced a different meaning to the scene by placing a male child on the floor. By changing the sex of the victim he has reiterated to his audience the superiority and intrinsic value of males over females, including Margaret herself. Finally, choosing to paint such dark complexions on Margaret and her children remind the observer that these are indeed slaves. Noble would have needed to at least paint the children lighter, if he were to be consistent with sources that describe them as nearly white. Levi Coffin reminisced that “the murdered child was almost white, a little girl of rare beauty.”<sup>55</sup> But Margaret’s life and children were far removed from memory at the time Noble completed his work. If he were to paint the children nearly white, doing so might have an adverse effect on the observer, causing them to misconstrue the scene even further by believing that the children did not belong to Margaret, or that Margaret had murdered a white child.

The title of Noble’s work is also of significance. In order to understand why Margaret was compared to the classical mythological legend, Medea, it is necessary to understand Medea’s story. Written by Euripides, *Medea* is the tale of a woman scorned. A refugee from her home in Colchis, she became the wife of Jason (of Troy fame), and bore two children with him. When Jason chose to marry a royal princess he cast off Medea, whose obsessive love for him turned to anger and rage. In order to strike at his heart, she killed their two children with a sword.<sup>56</sup>

It is clear to see why Noble would use this reference; however, the murder of children is where the comparison ends. Noble’s use of Medea does not cast a favorable light on Margaret. Margaret’s love for her children was described as so strong and all-consuming that she would rather see them die than end up back in the bonds of slavery. Medea was said to hate her children and took

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<sup>55</sup> Levi Coffin, 563.

<sup>56</sup> Euripides, *Medea*, accessed November 12, 2012, [www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/EuripidesMedeaLuschnig.pdf](http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/EuripidesMedeaLuschnig.pdf).

no pleasure in seeing them.<sup>57</sup> She was motivated by obsession and extreme hatred towards Jason, while Margaret was motivated by her love of her children and a hatred of her situation. Margaret is cast as both a heroine and villainess for her deed, dependent upon who is speaking for her. Medea can only be seen as a villain. Noble's act of giving Margaret the title of a modern Medea was his subtle way of besmearing her image, while at the same time declining to voice an opinion and appearing to be impartial.

Jo-Ann Morgan argues in her article on Noble's paintings that the artist adapted historic scenarios to the changing public discourse on the status of mulattos in the nation. She also writes that it is important to remember that his works sold for as much as \$2,000 each.<sup>58</sup> It is significant to note that Noble's *Medea* was completed two years after the Civil War had ended, and long after the Garner incident. As the time had passed for any abolitionist movements to free the slaves, this leads to the conclusion that Noble was not attempting to show any great sympathy over the status of slaves, mulattos or otherwise, but was using his talent to increase his own notoriety and status. While Margaret's story disappeared over time, Noble's artwork remained. He created an image of Margaret Garner – villainess and crazed murderess – that had a lasting impression, but his painting did not foster the true image of the woman. It would require nearly two centuries for history to reconnect and remember.

### ***Margaret as Memory***

Hers had been one of the more acclaimed fugitive tales of the period, exposed in newspapers, court transcripts, interviews, poetry and abolitionist tracts. But Margaret Garner's story faded into history after her death, her image resurfacing briefly as mahogany paint at the tip of an artist's brush. In the years following her death, slavery as an institution would be dissolved. Fugitives would no longer fear for their freedom; resistance would not need to be used as a tool for defiance of the master. The conflict between the North and the South would be resolved with the bloody Civil War. It was not until author Toni Morrison came across an interview with Margaret nearly a century and a half later, and was intrigued

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>58</sup> Jo-Ann Morgan, *Journal of American Studies*, 84-85.

enough to create a character loosely based on her life, that she was reintroduced to the world.

In 1973, Morrison was part of an editorial team that was in charge of gathering together an assortment of documents, photographs, advertisements of slave auctions, songs, stories, interviews and letters, for a collection entitled, *The Black Book*.<sup>59</sup> She came across an article in the *American Baptist*, written by P. S. Bassett of the Fairmount Theological Seminary. The piece entitled, “A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child,” was an interview with Margaret Garner, whom he deemed, “that unfortunate woman.” Bassett had been preaching at the prison and knew of her story. He inquired as to her demeanor, asking “if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. ‘No,’ she replied. ‘I was as cool as I am now, and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them taken back to slavery, and be murdered by piece-meal.’”<sup>60</sup> The interview that Morrison found was a fragment of newspaper history that had once been a part of a larger fascinating story. The resulting masterpiece created by Morrison was her novel, *Beloved*.

Just as Margaret had cut the throat of her young daughter to free her from the horrific conditions of slavery, so too did *Beloved*'s main character, Sethe. Parallels between Margaret and Sethe's story, however, are limited. In an interview with Morrison in the *New York Times*, the author talks specifically about deciding not to delve into and regurgitate Margaret's past, but to create a story based on an incident in her life. Morrison stated, “I did a lot of research about everything else in the book – Cincinnati, and abolitionists, and the Underground Railroad – but I refused to find out anything else about Margaret Garner. I really wanted to invent her life.”<sup>61</sup>

The need to invent a life is an important aspect of Morrison's work as it creates a different image, far removed from the complexities of history. Kimberly Chabot Davis in her study on Morrison and postmodernism writes that, “in *Beloved*, she is more concerned with origins, cycles and reconstructing agency than with

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<sup>59</sup> Middleton A. Harris, et al., *The Black Book* (New York: Random House, 2009).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> *New York Times*, *Toni Morrison in Her New Novel Defends Women*, accessed November 20, 2012, [www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/14013.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/14013.html).

decadence and self-parody. Although Morrison demystifies master historical narratives, she also wants to raise “real” or authentic African-American history in its place.”<sup>62</sup> By taking Margaret Garner’s interview and reconstructing her story, she has created a new view of life – a new image – not the perception of history. Morrison’s fiction empowers the image of Margaret Garner. Instead of researching her history and relating a world of circumstances that had already been written about, she brought Margaret Garner to the forefront, reinforcing her image as an African-American woman and mother.

Morrison’s work has had an important and profound impact on African-American history and culture. The issue of slavery, often swept under the rug, has been perceived as a history too difficult, painful, or perhaps even embarrassing for memory. Morrison’s novel drew critical praise, winning several prestigious awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature, and it became a powerful voice for the significance of memory.

Toni Morrison is a believer in memory. She states that, “if we don’t keep in touch with the ancestor, we are, in fact, lost. Memory is not an effort to find out the way it really was – that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way.”<sup>63</sup> She also stated that *Beloved* is not about slavery as an institution; it is about those anonymous people called slaves.<sup>64</sup>

Morrison reveals Sethe’s story in flashbacks. Her placement of a ghost in the story adds complexity and has several meanings. Firstly, the lingering ghost is an obvious reminder that a child has died, both in the fictionalized version, and in real life. Morrison forces the reader to recognize not only Sethe, but also the child that she killed. As Margaret’s story unfolded, supporters and detractors became so consumed by a whirlwind of issues – the horrors of the institution of slavery, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, state versus federal rights and master-slave relationships – they neglected to acknowledge the true victim. By creating the ghost

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<sup>62</sup> Kimberly Chabot Davis, *Post Modern Blackness: Toni Morrison’s Beloved and the End of History*, *Productive Postmodernism: Consuming Histories and Cultural Studies*, ed. John Noel Duvall (New York: State University of New York), 79-80.

<sup>63</sup> Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *American Literature* 64, no. 3 (1992): 567.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 569.

character, Morrison brings attention to Margaret Garner's daughter, Mary, who received virtually no acknowledgement after her death other than vague descriptions of her appearance. Morrison acknowledges the child as a person, not merely a piece of property.

Secondly, the ghost is a source of pain for the character Sethe; her child's spirit lingers, reminding her of a horrific past and a physical mother-child bond that she could no longer possess. Lastly, the ghost is a metaphor for history itself, the essence of memories long forgotten. Like the ghost, history is something that has passed on, something intangible, but always hovering. The acknowledgement of the ghost is a recognition that history, while always in the past, is something that resides in the present and must eventually be confronted.

*Beloved* invites curiosity and a means for African-Americans not only to remember the past, but also to consider the circumstances in which their ancestors lived. Morrison's fiction calls attention to slavery's victims, and is a reminder that these were flesh and blood people who lived, loved, fought, killed and died. It is her way of invoking the ancestors as a reminder of where African-Americans came from. It also can be seen as a means for intellectual and spiritual growth.

Because Morrison did not recreate the circumstances of Margaret's life, in a way she was suggesting that Margaret could have existed in any time period; the history itself was not as important as the person. Morrison invented Sethe and in the process gave Margaret a voice and a new image, reminding readers that she was a thinking, feeling woman. *Beloved* became a portal for Margaret, ensuring a niche in popular culture through Morrison's words.

Oprah Winfrey also played a part in reviving Margaret. As one of the most influential female voices in twentieth-century media, Winfrey brought Margaret's story to national attention by including Morrison's book in her popular book club. She subsequently produced the film, also named *Beloved*, and even portrayed the main character, Sethe.<sup>65</sup> While not a major box office success, the movie was responsible for not only exposing a younger generation to unconditional motherly love, and the effects

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<sup>65</sup> *Beloved*, directed by Jonathan Demme (October 16, 1988; Touchstone Pictures/Harpo Films).

of extremities on a person, but also re-generating an interest in that period of history.

Margaret Garner's legacy remains relevant today; she is found in books, documentaries a mural and even an opera. On May 7, 2005, *Margaret Garner, A New American Opera in Two Acts*, debuted its first performance in Detroit, Michigan. With music by award-winning composer Richard Danielpour, and the libretto by Morrison herself, the opera presents a storyline that is a closer rendition of the historical facts, but still allows for artistic license. Although set in Kentucky in April 1856, Act I opens in complete darkness. This supports Morrison's original concept of creating a character and not the history; the stage does not allow for any sense of location or concept of time. Some of the discrepancies are as follows: Margaret is depicted returning to Kentucky to stand trial for theft and destruction of property, as the child was considered property of the owner, Archibald Gaines; she is led to the gallows, but is granted clemency; even after winning her freedom, she decides to take her own life and hangs herself.<sup>66</sup> Even though Morrison's opera is not historically accurate, she does more to define Margaret's image as a woman, mother and a wife, thus allowing the audience a better understanding of the trials and tribulations that she had to endure. The opera was critically acclaimed and enjoyed sold-out audiences, renewing interest in this tragic story.

The state of Ohio also is responsible for keeping Margaret Garner's story current. Presumably selected to depict the point of their escape across the frozen Ohio River, a mural painted by Robert Dafford of Louisiana on Covington's Ohio River floodwall, stands as homage to Margaret and her family (Figure 2).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Richard Danielpour, with a libretto by Toni Morrison, *Margaret Garner, A New American Opera in Two Acts* (May 7, 2005) accessed November 20, 2012, [www.operacarolina.org/content/operas/libretto/207.pdf](http://www.operacarolina.org/content/operas/libretto/207.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> Robert Dafford, *Mural on Covington's Ohio River Floodwall*, accessed November 23, 2012, [www.cincinnati.com/blogs/ourhistory/2012/02/20/slave-chose-death-for-child](http://www.cincinnati.com/blogs/ourhistory/2012/02/20/slave-chose-death-for-child).



Figure 2: Robert Dafford, *Mural, Margaret Garner escapes*

## Conclusion

Margaret Garner was returned to Kentucky and eventually sent to Arkansas by Gaines. En route, the ship, *Edward Howard*, carrying Margaret, her husband and children, collided with another vessel, the *Henry Lewis*. What happened next is not clear. Margaret and her daughter, Cilla, were either thrown overboard by the collision, or Margaret saw an opportunity to finish what she had begun and tried to jump to her death with her child. The young child perished, but Margaret was rescued.<sup>68</sup> Thus she would remain enslaved, though at least two of her children were now freed from bondage. Above all else Margaret Garner was a woman and a mother. These categories provide for their own images and descriptions, but unfortunately, they were not considerations in the factors of her life. She was seen in a multitude of ways, all images conducive to others rather than Margaret the woman. The ideas of slavery, laws, revolutions, avidity and ambition, and activists' agendas are concepts whose philosophies and interpretations last through time. The woman that was Margaret faded in history.

As a slave Margaret was born into an institution that did not value her unquantifiable worth as a human being, but considered her and her offspring to be property. For any number of reasons she chose to free herself from that condition; in the end it did not matter why or how, but only that she ran. Becoming a fugitive was a chance for freedom, a chance to rebel against the

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<sup>68</sup> Weisenburger, 223-224.

institution and resist those who would deny her status as a woman, as a human being. It was a chance to give her children a new life away from the horrors that had been inflicted upon her.

Greek legends such as Medea lasted across the centuries because they were just that, legends, created to relate a specific story or moral, or to entertain, but Margaret had no true legend until Toni Morrison resurrected her memory. Morrison herself speaks of the importance of memory. Memory defines history, and without it history is lost. It is a necessary tool for understanding the past and finding something useful for the present. Even though there are very few similarities in Morrison's story to the real life drama that belonged to Margaret, it provides enough perspective to begin a dialogue and offer some insight into who she was.

Margaret was lost to history because she was not the slave, fugitive, resistance, conflict, heroine or art that had developed in around her and her story. She was a woman whose plight was complicated enough to cause her to fall into a churning abyss that pulled her deep into obscurity. But with all things considered, in the history of mankind, Margaret Garner was an American woman with a story to tell, and is no longer lost.

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### **Author Bio**

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