

DRIVEN TOWARD MADNESS

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Bodies and Souls*

Enslaved women rarely used deadly violence in the long history of American slavery. Those who did, typically killed their owners and not their loved ones—especially not their own living, breathing children. In 1856, Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman from northern Kentucky, murdered her infant daughter and attempted to kill her other children while trying to escape slavery. The question this book answers is why. What concerns or grievances led this enslaved woman to commit deadly violence? Margaret Garner's story suggests that damage done to them as women—as wives and mothers, in particular—could and did sometimes drive them to murder.

Margaret Garner's life history is full of things deemed unspeakable, dishonorable, and ugly in nineteenth-century America, including physical abuse, child murder, possible sexual abuse and mental illness, slavery, and death. Her story is as uncomfortable as it is captivating—so much so, that it has inspired several novels, works of historical fiction, collected essays, a film, and an opera. The story had completely dropped out of the public consciousness and conscience for more than one hundred years until Toni Morrison reintroduced it through her 1987 novel *Beloved*. The novel and Jonathan Demme's 1998 film adaptation with the same name, starring Oprah Winfrey, Danny Glover, and Thandie Newton, helped raise the public consciousness about this tragic story. Set after the Civil War just outside Cincinnati, Ohio, *Beloved* is about a former slave woman named

Sethe who beheaded her own two-year-old daughter to prevent her from being sent back to slavery. Sethe is haunted by the angry ghost of her murdered daughter until that spirit is made flesh in a young woman who shows up at her door one day. The arrival of the young woman leads Sethe on a path whereby she is forced to confront the painful memories and traumas of her enslaved past. Morrison's *Beloved* is a powerful assertion that slavery damaged not only black women's exteriors—their bodies—but also their interiors—their minds and spirits.

*Driven toward Madness: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Garner and Tragedy on the Ohio* uses the real history of Garner to demonstrate how slavery can and did cause interior and exterior injuries. This book reminds the reader in painstaking detail what life must have been like for Margaret Garner as a powerless, unprotected, and enslaved black woman who bore children in slavery. Such women not only endured various forms of physical and sexual abuse but were susceptible to the emotional traumas of living under the constant threat of violence, rape, familial separation, persistent racist insults, and other forms of degradation. Slavery guaranteed that these women perpetually lived in a state of vulnerability, fear, and physical and emotional pain. Enslaved women mostly endured that damage quietly and internally, but at times, their response erupted violently, outwardly and even publicly, in ways that defy comprehension or prevent our sympathy. This book is concerned with those eruptions of deadly violence and their implications about enslaved women's damaged interiors. It is also concerned with a socially unacceptable type of slave resistance and what it may suggest about enslaved women's power or powerlessness.

Slavery caused trauma. The human responses to that trauma are the concerns of this project. Margaret Garner's case underscores the fact that those responses are not always rational or bloodless. Some of these responses to trauma are, in fact, gruesome and incomprehensible, as hers were. It is easy to conclude that she was mentally ill, but by doing so, we redirect the conversation away from the conditions and experiences that may have triggered such acts, as well as away from the political import of said actions. Margaret Garner resisted in dozens of ways throughout the course of this case and managed, ever so faintly, to tell her very powerful story.

Unfortunately, psychological and spiritual injuries rarely attract the attention of historians. Because the spirit and soul are considered the realm of the metaphysical or spiritual, intellectuals often discount or dismiss

injuries to them. Yet there is a direct relationship between racist and sexist insults, sexual and physical assaults—injustice in any form—and psychological pain. The multiplicative and compounded effects of those injuries can “murder” the soul. Historian Nell Irvin Painter, borrowing from the discipline of psychology, uses an interpretive concept of “soul murder,” which is a useful framework to explain the experiences of enslaved woman in general and Margaret Garner specifically. According to Nell Painter, sexual abuse, emotional deprivation, physical and mental torture can be “compounded . . . as a series of hurts the weight of which shatters, or wounds, the soul.” Soul murder, then, is manifest in depression, anxiety, self-mutilation, or suicide attempts, or the equivalent of what psychologists call posttraumatic stress disorder.<sup>1</sup>

Historian Wilma King asserts that soul murder can make survivors self-destructive or can lead to expressions of extreme hatred toward or a desire to hurt the abuser or violence against others.<sup>2</sup> In other words, soul-murdered people can be driven to actions that are often desperate, violent, irrational, or deadly, like murder. This psychoanalytical framework better explains Margaret Garner’s actions than any other. The concept of soul murder is, by no means, an attempt to excuse or justify those actions, but to better understand them. For example, through this framework, one can better understand why she attempted to kill her children instead of Archibald K. Gaines—the man who owned her. Nor is soul murder an attempt to posthumously psychoanalyze Margaret Garner. Instead, the soul murder conceptual framework simply positions physical, sexual, and mental trauma, abuse, and torture as central to this story of slavery, escape, and resistance. Slavery caused real human beings to suffer in various ways, some of which were measurable and others of which were not evident until an eruption of violence occurred. Trauma theory, then, can produce a historical, political, and cultural understanding of the physical and emotional injuries that enslaved women such as Garner suffered.

This book also grapples with the history of black corporality as it intersects with slavery. The late historian Stephanie M. H. Camp in *Closer to Freedom* crafted a brilliant interpretive framework that is quite useful in explaining Margaret Garner’s enslavement. Camp contended that enslaved people figuratively possessed three “bodies,” or three ways that they experienced slavery corporally. The “first body” was a site of domination and mastery. It is in this body that they were sexually and physically abused and commodified. This book explores ways in which enslaved

people were owned and rented, worked and driven, beaten and abused, injured and broken. In addition to those experiences, Garner's dominated body—especially her work productivity and reproductivity—enlarged her owner's wealth, status, and power. Camp's "second body" insists that the body functioned as "a vehicle of terror, humiliation and pain." Garner was soul murdered in her "second body." Camp's "third" body, as a source of pleasure and enjoyment in the face of bondage, is not relevant to this project.<sup>3</sup> If we expand the concept of three bodies, we might consider a fourth body: one that engages in resistance and violent eruptions in response to trauma. *Driven toward Madness* privileges Margaret Garner's corporal slave experience in her first and second body and her response to it in her fourth. In particular, it underscores the abuse, trauma, fear, terror, grief, brokenness, and hopelessness that led to her soul murder while enslaved in Richwood, Kentucky, while also emphasizing the hope of escape and freedom and the subsequent disappointment and desperation when faced with recapture.

This book also uses Margaret Garner's story to underscore how slavery damaged African American women in their roles as women, wives, and mothers. As Patricia Hill Collins has argued, "African-American women's experiences as mothers have been shaped by the dominant group's effort to harness black women's sexuality and fertility to a system of capitalist exploitation." Moreover, slavery despoiled how Margaret Garner practiced motherhood; it despoiled her image of herself as a mother, damaged her bonds with her children, denied her the right to protect them, and even undermined her authority over them. In sum, slavery corrupted everything about motherhood and prevented a full expression of the ideals of womanhood. It also damaged black marriages and families and troubled the bonds between family members. Slavery tried to make a mockery of the Garners' marriage: it refused their rights to live under the same roof or fully enjoy the intimate bonds of marriage when and how they desired. Slavery destroyed the confidence that a child born to a wife was her husband's child. In short, slavery debased Margaret Garner's family inside and out.<sup>4</sup>

My overarching goal is to bring the historical Margaret Garner and her family into sharper focus by underscoring their trauma, as a unit and as individuals. As an enslaved woman, she left only faint traditional historical footprints herself: she could not read or write and left no diary, letters, or personal papers. None of this was her choice, but was a consequence

of enslavement. So it is exceedingly difficult to know exactly what she thought or believed. Perhaps this is why Steven Weisenburger concluded in *Modern Medea* that her life was “nonnarratable” until she escaped Kentucky and committed murder.<sup>5</sup>

We would be remiss to accept that the story of this enslaved and traumatized woman is “nonnarratable” until she did something unthinkable. This book provides one example for how we might fill the gaps and silences in historical sources—not with fiction, but with traditional and nontraditional historical sources, other disciplines, methods, and interpretive frameworks. Although Margaret Garner is one of the few runaway slaves ever to testify at his or her own fugitive slave hearing, there are no extant official transcripts of that hearing. Hence, this book relies on the transcriptions of the proceedings of the fugitive slave hearing recorded in the local newspapers, other newspaper accounts, indictment and requisition orders, as well as the manuscript collection of John Pollard Gaines, Margaret’s original owner. I utilize interdisciplinary approaches to bring the real Margaret into sharper focus. Anchored in history, this book also makes use of black feminist theory, trauma studies, pain studies, genetics, history of emotions, and literary criticism. Each of these approaches sews a layer of flesh onto a figure who has been rendered an apparition by the sources and raises the decibels of a voice that had been silenced before and after the murder. At the end of this book, a real-life woman in her proper historical and cultural context should emerge. In these critical ways and others, this book differs from Weisenburger’s imaginative and entertaining narrative in *Modern Medea*, which mixes history, drama, and historical fiction. *Driven toward Madness* has defied naysayers and journeyed to some difficult historical places to find the real Margaret Garner. It may not definitively answer all of the questions concerning her life, but it gets us a step closer. More than anything, though, this book should simply serve as a guide for how we might reclaim black women’s voices and agency in history when traditional historical sources are scarce, nonexistent, vague, coded, or erased.

A black feminist interpretation of Garner’s life—as an enslaved woman, wife, and mother—offers a more holistic picture of who she truly was and what drove her to kill. It rejects the distortions and fictionalized images of her that essentially reduce her to various symbols—all with their own audiences and purposes: to free African Americans and abolitionists, Margaret Garner was the first widely known black female hero—a

potent symbol of slave resistance; contemporary women's rights advocates tried to use Garner as a feminist symbol; and proslavery folks raised her as a black bogeyman. The real Margaret Garner is nothing close to any of those depictions. Although she had not intended to make a political statement about slavery or women's rights when she attacked her children, her actions are loaded with political meaning, nonetheless. For one, they impugn her owner as particularly cruel and directly undermine the myth that her enslavement had been mild. Beyond simply emphasizing that she was a whole woman and not just a symbol created by others, interdisciplinary theories and approaches allow me to probe slavery's legacy of violence—sexual and physical—and psychic trauma and their capacity to render Margaret Garner “mad.” I deal with her as a traumatized black female in historical, social, cultural, and political terms; she carried a history of the trauma of slavery—personal, collective, and compounded—with her on her journey to freedom the day she escaped. Margaret's history of abuse, enslavement, and denied freedom and humanity burdened her with its full weight as she faced her deepest fear of returning to that life and watching her children grow up in it. Despite such burdens and traumas, Margaret Garner was not destroyed and nor was her spirit. Her family and her hope for freedom for her children were a salve.

Garner's trauma is at the center of my historical question, so I find it useful to embrace the history of emotions' assumption that emotions have their own histories. Understanding the historical, social, and cultural context in which these emotional events are produced does get us a step closer to understanding them. How Margaret processed her slave experience, grief, threat of recapture, imprisonment, trial, and subsequent loss on the Ohio River has meaning and significance to this story. Moreover, the history of emotions frees me to make claims about Margaret Garner's emotions based on my familiarity with her world, life, family, words, and actions. As historian Andrew J. Huebner posits, “Evoking feeling does not have to distract us from our primary goal as historians—to convey the character of human life in the past—and in fact helps achieve it.”<sup>6</sup>

African American women's history—especially this black woman's history—brings together the history of emotions, the history of black corporality, trauma studies, the histories of science and psychology, legal, political, and social history, the history of slavery, and even the history of free blacks. In short, African American women are at the heart of American history and its many subfields.