

Margaret Garner, Rememory, and the Infinite Past: History in *Beloved*

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While Toni Morrison's *Beloved* demonstrates a deep concern with the legacy of slavery in the United States, it also makes comprehensible for contemporary readers the dehumanizing personal experiences of enslaved individuals. As Morrison has said in multiple interviews, her intention in this novel was to create a "narrow and deep" internalized view of slavery instead of the wide, epic sweep that she had found to be more often depicted elsewhere. *Beloved* both draws on the historical record and creates an individualized past for her formerly enslaved characters, especially Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, and Stamp Paid. These characters, in addition to Denver, who is born while Sethe is escaping, are simultaneously obsessed with and repelled by the horrors of their histories, haunted with pain while struggling to understand and make peace with their vivid "rememories." In order to develop the depth of authenticity in *Beloved*, Morrison blends historical fact with imagination, thus resulting in a greater effect than either one could achieve separately. She simultaneously works to excavate hidden elements of American history for the culture at large, as well as for her specific characters, thus resulting in the potential of healing for all.

Throughout her novels, Toni Morrison regularly focuses on history and its influence on the present. Whether this tendency manifests as characters stuck in the guilt of past mistakes, as we see in works ranging from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *Home* (2012) to *God Help the Child* (2015), or where family and communal history dominates, as in *Song of Solomon* (1976) and *Paradise* (1998), Morrison's created world frequently looks back in time. Morrison explains her point of view and her novels' historical preoccupation: "There is infinitely more past than there is future.... The past is infinite" (qtd. in Fowler & Abadie 27). This concept of the infinite past is one that recurs throughout Morrison's work and which she

comments upon repeatedly elsewhere. In creating her fiction, she sees history as a bottomless well from which to draw inspiration and content. Her own family history contributes to this focus because she has strong influences from her close relationships with her siblings, parents, and grandparents. For example, she heard first-hand accounts of Alabama slavery from her maternal grandfather and great-grandmother, both of whom lived with her family, resulting in her intimate awareness of this most horrific part of American history. In addition, as she has explained in interviews, these familial ties have influenced Morrison's geographical awareness, as her parents' and grandparents' stories of their lives in Alabama and Georgia gave her a sensibility of the US South not always available in such communities as Lorain, Ohio, where she was born and raised (Denard 178). All told, this sense of personal history fits within Morrison's broader cultural consciousness, resulting in distinctive foundational undercurrents throughout her fiction.

Margaret Garner and Cultural History

Although Morrison has explained that she intended to create a novel, not a documentary, key elements of the plotline of *Beloved* were inspired by the historical record, especially concerning Margaret Garner. As Angelita Reyes explains, here, "Morrison is not as concerned with recording historical facts as she is with constructing meaning and emotional *truth* out of them" (77). The fraught history of United States slavery permeates *Beloved*, with powerful examples both narrow and broad. With its setting focused on Sweet Home, a farm in northern Kentucky, and 124 Bluestone Road, a house in Cincinnati, Ohio, the novel draws upon geography and fact to undergird its imaginative explorations. As Morrison has explained, she initially was inspired to create the novel after learning about a significant historical figure, Margaret Garner, whom she first discovered through her work as a book editor on the seminal collection *The Black Book*, edited by Middleton A. Harris and published by Random House in 1974.

Margaret Garner is remembered today because of her daring reaction to her failed escape to freedom. On a snowy night in

January 1856, Margaret Garner, along with her husband, Robert, his parents, and their four children, escaped from Maplewood Farm in Richwood, Kentucky, where they were all enslaved, into what they hoped would be the beginning of freedom in Cincinnati, twenty miles away. Traveling by horse-drawn sleigh overnight to the riverfront town of Covington, Kentucky, the group then continued on foot over the frozen Ohio River into Cincinnati, specifically to the home of a free cousin, Elijah Kite. While the plan was for them next to proceed northward to freedom in Canada via the Underground Railroad, with the assistance of white Quaker abolitionist Levi Coffin, instead the house was surrounded, and they quickly were caught by the enslaver, Archibald Gaines, along with law enforcement officers. Faced with a certain return to the horrors of slavery, Robert and Margaret initially resisted capture: he shot and wounded two deputies, and she cut her toddler daughter Mary's throat with a butcher knife and struck the other children with a shovel. She later explained that her goal was to kill them and herself, preferring death for them all to re-enslavement. Mary died, and the surviving family members were captured and imprisoned.

The case drew national attention, with the dominant question being whether or not Margaret Garner would be charged with destruction of property or murder. Delores Walters explains the broader context: "Pro-slavery proponents considered Margaret's act of infanticide evidence of the savagery of Black women, thus justifying slavery, while anti-slavery activists vilified slavery itself, not its victims," who, they said, were forced to such violence by the evil system (4). Renowned abolitionist Lucy Stone spoke in the packed courtroom, shocking everyone with her blunt allegation that the pale skin of three out of four of Margaret's children—whom newspaper accounts describe as "almost white"—came about because they were conceived from rape by the enslaver, Archibald Gaines: "The faded faces of the negro children tell too plainly to what degradation the female slaves submit. Rather than give her little daughter to that life, she killed it. If in her deep maternal love she felt the impulse to send her child back to God, to save it from coming woe, who shall say she had no right to do it?" (qtd. in

Weisenburger 173). In his important book about Margaret Garner, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (1998), Steven Weisenburger supports Stone's allegation and corroborates this theory with documentation showing that Gaines was present at Maplewood before each of Margaret's three last pregnancies. Although newspaper accounts in *Cincinnati Gazette* state that Stone discussed possibly buying her freedom or beseeching Gaines to grant it, no mercy was offered to Margaret Garner, and the legal proceedings took their course. Because a murder charge would have meant that her deceased daughter was considered to be a human being, the overarching legal mandates instead prevailed. Margaret Garner, therefore, was convicted of the crime of destruction of property, returned to the custody of the enslavers, and literally sold down the river, dying two years later from typhoid fever in Mississippi.

Margaret explained the motivation for her courageous actions to P. S. Bassett when he visited the Garners in prison, stating that she preferred to "kill [her children all] at once, and thus end their suffering, than have them taken back to slavery and be murdered by piece-meal." In an article first published in *The American Baptist* in February 1856, Bassett, of Cincinnati's Fairmount Theological Seminary, sympathetically describes that meeting and remarks on Margaret's stoic reaction to the outcome: "She alludes to the child she killed as being free from all trouble and sorrow, with a degree of satisfaction that almost chills the blood in one's veins; yet she evidently possesses all the passionate tenderness of a mother's love" (10). It is telling that both Stone and Bassett, each of whom was white, recognize and comment upon the humanity and conviction of maternal love that Margaret Garner's bold actions demonstrate.

Margaret Garner's decisive act, to protect her child from slavery through death, was widely regarded by abolitionists as radical and brave because an enslaved woman deciding the fate of her child was unusual, and, while infanticide in such a circumstance was not unheard of, it was rare. In addition to Bassett's article, this case inspired other contemporary responses, including a dramatic 1867 painting by Thomas Satterwhite Noble, *The Modern Medea*, which

now hangs in the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati. In addition, shortly after learning about Margaret Garner, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was prompted to create a powerful poem.

Harper's 1857 poem, "The Slave Mother: A Tale of the Ohio" (not to be confused with her 1854 poem simply entitled "The Slave Mother") brings to the fore the motivations and emotions of Margaret Garner and makes vivid her decision to save her daughter through death. In this sixty-four-line poem, Harper develops a domestic narrative where Margaret's devotion to her children, her "treasures," is beyond doubt. She tries to escape into Ohio and find sanctuary for her refugee family, but, when this proves impossible, her commitment to freedom does not waver, but shifts in its target from desire for a purported free state to the afterlife:

I will save my precious children
From their darkly threatened doom,
I will hew their path to freedom
Through the portals of the tomb. (Harper 45–48)

If safety cannot be achieved on earth, then this determined mother will transform her life-giving power into life-taking and send her children to heaven. Harper makes Margaret Garner's logic clear: if life is hell, then death is peace. Through exalting Margaret's "deed of fearful daring" by the poem's end, Harper exhorts her readers to join the fight against slavery's tyranny and seek abolition at all costs. In addition, by entitling this poem as she does, coupled with her earlier poem with a similar title, Harper draws attention to the impossible status of enslaved women; while routinely forced to give birth to offspring also destined to a hellish life of bondage, they often were prevented from truly mothering their children. Harper's 1854 poem, "The Slave Mother," depicts a helpless and desperate woman whose child is forcibly torn from her arms on an auction block, while in the latter poem, the mother chooses her child's fate.

Learning of Margaret Garner's singular actions inspired Toni Morrison in a similar way as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, for both authors focused on this brave woman's maternal commitment and

compassion. When reading a clipping in the early 1970s of Bassett's 1856 article on Garner, Morrison was struck by the audacity of this woman who dared to determine the ultimate fate of her child, although she and her child were enslaved. In a new foreword to the 2004 edition of *Beloved*, Morrison states that she was impressed with Margaret Garner, who "had the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom" (xvii). As Walters describes it, "Margaret Garner's act of infanticide represents the most drastic and extreme form of woman-centered resistance to the brutality of slavery" (1). Pondering what it meant for Margaret Garner, an enslaved mother, to kill her child *out of love*, Morrison was prompted to create a fictional story that interrogates such difficult positions through the actions and anxieties of her novel's protagonist, Sethe. In a 1987 video interview with Alan Benson, Morrison explains her reaction to Garner's powerful sense of agency: "For me, it was the ultimate gesture of the loving mother. It was also the outrageous claim of a slave. The last thing a slave woman owns is her children" (qtd. in Benson).

Inspired by Margaret Garner, but departing significantly from the historical record, *Beloved* is unequivocally a work of fiction. Instead of writing a novel about Garner, in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison imagines the lives of her created characters, especially the enslaved mother, Sethe. In her foreword to *Beloved*, Morrison explains:

The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space there for my purposes. So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's "place." The heroine would represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom. The terrain, slavery, was formidable and pathless. (*Beloved* xvii)

In seeking historical truth "in essence" rather than strictly through fact, Morrison keeps the Margaret Garner story at the center around which she deftly transforms history and layers on her created literary