

TONI MORRISON AND THE TRANSLATION OF HISTORY IN *MARGARET GARNER*

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Abstract

This article probes how Toni Morrison translates biographical history in *Margaret Garner* in relation to Black women's self-determination. Margaret Garner was regarded with both reproach and reverence for murdering her two-year-old daughter to prevent the child from being returned to slavery after they escaped in 1856. Writing the 2005 opera *Margaret Garner*, Morrison made a number of changes to the historical narrative of the eponymous heroine. The focus of her translation is not on presenting an accurate recountal of history; rather, the goal is to redress the limitations placed on Black women's self-determination by granting them agency through this interpretation of Garner.

Key Words: Margaret Garner; Toni Morrison; agency; history; translation; filicide; *Beloved*; opera

Introduction

Margaret Garner was regarded with both reproach and reverence for murdering her two-year-old daughter to prevent the child from being returned to slavery. In the ensuing years, the 1856 incident captured the interests of writers of diverse political sensibilities, from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to John Jolliffe to Dolores Kendrick. The case also kindled the creation of Toni Morrison's acclaimed 1987 novel, *Beloved*. Following the work's success, Morrison once again interpreted Garner's life, this time less obliquely in an opera that bears her name.

Writing the 2005 opera *Margaret Garner* more than a decade later, Morrison, with composer Richard Danielpour, made a number of changes to the historical narrative of the eponymous heroine. The construction of the opera's libretto, character development, and physical production typify Garner as a woman of strength, virtue, intelligence, and principle. The focus of her translation is not on presenting an accurate recountal of history; rather, the goal is to redress the limitations placed on Black women's self-determination by granting them agency through this interpretation of Garner.

To establish that Morrison utilizes her version of Garner to grant agency to slave women, the following three focal points will be interrogated: Garner's history, from her escape from slavery through her habeas corpus hearing; Morrison's translation of those same events for the opera; and how various elements of the inaugural production of *Margaret Garner* buttressed Morrison's aims.

Margaret Garner's Quest for Freedom

Born on June 4, 1833 on Maplewood plantation in Kentucky, Margaret Garner was a biracial slave woman who spent most of her life as a domestic worker in the home of her owner, Archibald K. Gaines. By all accounts, Gaines was a capriciously brutal owner. Margaret, her mother, Cilla, and her four children were owned by Gaines; her husband, Robert, and his parents were owned by a neighboring planter.

Snow fell continuously on that fateful last Sunday in 1856. The entire Garner family planned to end their enslavement by absconding via the Underground Railroad. Rather fortuitously, the Ohio River, usually the barrier to freedom, had frozen solid. In its wintry condition, the river would serve as the bridge to liberty for the Garner family. They intended to stop briefly at the home of their recently manumitted cousins in Cincinnati before travelling to safety and freedom in Canada.

However, their secret plot had been discovered within a matter of hours and Gaines was in pursuit with a posse of ten men. Even with the uninterrupted snowfall, the tracks made by their sleigh proved easy to follow. The Garners had not been at their cousins' household long before Gaines and his men forced their way in. Pandemonium reigned as pistol shots were exchanged.

Calm yet steely in her resolve, in an instant, Margaret decided to kill her children and then herself rather than be returned to slavery. While any number of thoughts could have been swirling through the young mother's head as this critical choice was made, one thing is certain: Garner is on record as having stated that she wished to kill her children so that they would not be forced back into slavery. With such a force that it nearly decapitated the toddler, Margaret first slit the throat of two-year-old Mary. She then turned her mortal attention to her two sons and infant daughter, but was unsuccessful in their murders.

The Garners' story and the inquest that followed added fuel to America's already incendiary slavery debate. The hearing would

determine whether the Garners would be returned as slaves to their Kentucky plantations. Newspapers all around the country began carrying the macabre details of Mary's murder. The story mesmerized the nation for months, no doubt because of the sensationalism of the event.

Pro- and anti-slavery commentators alike took advantage of the opportunity to superimpose their ideologies on Garner's murder of her daughter. For pro-slavery factions, the filicide demonstrated that African Americans were inherently inferior savages who needed the guidance and structure of slavery. By contrast, from pulpits to pamphlets and from newspaper columns to street corners, abolitionists used the incident to paint a portrait of slavery causing such debasement and degradation that otherwise decent people were reduced to heinous, inhuman acts. There were consistent comparisons of Margaret Garner to everyone from Virginius to Patrick Henry. As opposed to depicting them as wicked or insane, anti-slavery agitators exemplified mothers like Garner as caring parents who lacked options and had to go to devastating lengths to battle the institution of slavery.

A frenetic atmosphere pervaded the Garner hearing from the very beginning. The presiding commissioner, John Pendery, banned African Americans from the courthouse in order to limit racial acerbity during the proceeding. In the entire annals of American jurisprudence, Margaret Garner is the only accused fugitive slave on record as having testified at her own hearing, which was also the longest and costliest in history. What few records remain indicate there was much contradictory testimony.

Famed abolitionist and anti-slavery writer, John Jolliffe, represented the Garners; he used his extensive knowledge of the Constitution and the Bible to argue for Margaret's freedom. Quite explosive was the testimony by his star witness, abolitionist Lucy Stone. Surprising and scandalous at the time was the connection she made between Margaret's act and the rights and responsibilities of any Christian mother to protect her child.

Despite Jolliffe's passionate sermonizing and careful legal maneuvering, Commissioner Pendery ruled that the Garners should be returned to their respective owners. Margaret was never tried for the murder of her daughter.

Toni Morrison and the Contemporary Renaissance of Margaret Garner

Not much was heard about Margaret Garner for the next century and a half. Then in 1987, Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*, debuted and once again, the Garner's story rose to prominence. In order to contextualize Morrison's interpretation for *Margaret Garner*, it is useful to examine how she came to write *Beloved*. Morrison took a "less is more" approach to researching Garner's life. It was in 1973, while working as a senior editor at Random House and co-creating *The Black Book*, a compendium of essays commemorating Black history, that she first encountered a very brief article from 1856 on the Garner incident. "A Visit to a Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child", written by a minister, P. S. Bassett, and published on February 12, 1856 in *American Baptist*, described a brief visit to Garner in jail, where she explained why she killed her daughter. It is one of the few extant records of Garner's words.

Her imagination captured, Morrison was inspired to develop the storyline of *Beloved*. Though she began an exhaustive exploration into slavery and abolitionism, she chose not to engage in additional research into Garner's history or the sites of the incident.

"I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than the obvious stuff, because I wanted to invent her life, which is a way of saying I wanted to be accessible to anything the characters had to say about it. Recording her life as lived would not interest me, and would not make me available to anything that might be pertinent". (DARLING 1988: 4)

Details about her life and the incident mattered less to Morrison than the symbolism of Garner's choices. Upon determining that the value of Garner's story lay in her decision to assert her basic human rights by killing her daughter, the other facts were rendered expendable.

Despite that Garner's filicide planted the seeds of the novel in Morrison's head, *Beloved* was in no way a biographical account of her exploits. Sethe's life diverges from Margaret's in many substantive ways; their ages, the dates of the murders, the fates of their husbands, and the nature of their legal all differ.

In reading *Beloved*, an acknowledged work of fiction, audiences anticipate and understand that details large and small have been altered for literary purposes. Expectations for *Margaret Garner*, the opera that carries her name and markets itself as being about her life, have been somewhat different for many. For Morrison's translation, the dramatic

needs of the opera mandated changing aspects of her life and appending elements of other slave stories in order to universalize Margaret Garner's experience. Constructing her life as something oecumenic rather than truly biographical accorded the license to change facts and restructure events. Morrison averred,

"...[Keep] in mind that this is not a historical opera in the sense that everything is followed historically because, as artists, we create, sometimes, an illusion in order to keep a greater truth and artists do this kind of thing. We take artistic license, but the gist of her story and of hundreds of stories that have, in a way, been assimilated into this work that we put together." (FULLER 2004)

A certain amount of telescoping is standard for biographical adaptations; for the sake of simplicity, characters and events are frequently combined, elided, or otherwise rendered differently. However, *Margaret Garner's* redactions were done for other artistic reasons; as will be discussed more in depth in the next section, its mission statement asserts that the opera's purpose to initiate dialogue about "the enduring quest for freedom in... our communities" (MISSION 2009). This dialogue is framed by Morrison's agency-granting, factually transposed narrative.

(Re)Constructing *Margaret Garner*, Part I: The Production

An attention to reclaiming the legacy of American slavery was not limited to the creation of the libretto. The creators and producers sought out the audience that was most likely to be receptive to that message: the Black community. As only four percent of American opera-goers are Black, particular attention was paid to attracting a larger than average African American audience.

Subsequent to a gestation period of more than seven years, *Margaret Garner* premiered in Detroit on May 7, 2005 at the Michigan Opera Theater; the inaugural production subsequently played at the Cincinnati Opera in July 2005 and at the Opera Company of Philadelphia in February 2006. The aim was to premiere the opera in cities with sizable African American populations. Sales in all three cities were very strong.

In addition, *Margaret Garner's* corporate sponsors had strong ties to the Black community. Procter and Gamble, General Motors, and Cadillac have large Black clienteles and Montgomery, McCracken, Walker, and Rhoads, LLP is acclaimed in Philadelphia for its support of diversity

initiatives. These sponsors helped to raise the opera's profile within the Black community.

The opera's mission statement plainly identified attracting a nontraditional audience base as an objective:

"Michigan Opera Theatre, Cincinnati Opera, and Opera Company of Philadelphia have partnered to create a powerful new American opera of lasting artistic significance that will resonate locally and nationally. The mission of Margaret Garner is to

- Share the poignant and historically significant story of Margaret Garner with traditional and nontraditional opera audiences through the creation of a new American grand opera;
 - Portray her story with integrity and respect through the vision of a world-class creative team and a production of the highest artistic standards;
 - Inspire passionate reactions and meaningful dialogue about the enduring quest for freedom in America that reaches beyond the opera house and into our communities."
- ("MISSION" 2009)

This "nontraditional" audience to a large extent was constituted by African Americans. Care was taken to give the opera the greatest appeal possible to African Americans. African American classical music superstars Denyce Graves, Gregg Baker, Angela Brown, and Jessye Norman all essayed leading roles in *Margaret Garner* at various points. Kenny Leon, well regarded for his stage appearances and direction of Hansberry and Wilson plays, assumed his first work in the opera as director of *Margaret Garner*. Best known for the dances he created for several Stevie Wonder tours, Patdro Harris served as the choreographer.

Morrison and the producers developed an instructive element that would inform audiences about the broad implications of that which was depicted in the opera. This educational component accompanied the inaugural productions; it was intended to ensure responsible telling of Garner's story. Independent scholars, including Delores Walters of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, and Steven Weisenburger, author of *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child Murder from the Old South*, were brought in for "community outreach." They gave pre- and post-show lectures to educate the nontraditional audiences on the issues the producers deemed culturally and historically significant.

So successful was their aim to increase Black audiences that the Philadelphia Inquirer's review of *Margaret Garner* began,

"[...The] Michigan Opera Theater premiere on Saturday was a public-relations triumph... Dramaturgical lapses are there, but the strengths of *Margaret Garner* are so considerable and wide-ranging that the piece is legitimately destined to make new friends for opera without alienating old ones." (STEARNS 2005)

David Patrick Stearns seems to be more impressed by the opera's ability to augment Black viewership than by the actual work itself. The creators were careful to create an opera that was flashy enough to appeal to those who do not typically frequent the opera, yet sufficiently conservative to appease their traditional audience base.

That eager-to-please sensibility affected the score. Danielpour's easily accessible, audience-friendly music was not strong enough to support Morrison's powerfully complex, yet tautly written libretto. Danielpour's neo-romantic score shows hints of gospel, blues, R&B, and jazz, with more than slightly anachronistic suggestions of Leonard Bernstein's, Aaron Copeland's, and Carlisle Floyd's compositions. The White characters often sing Nineteenth Century waltzes, Protestant hymns, bluegrass, and parlor songs while the Black characters mostly perform jazz-inflected spirituals and work songs. Leon described the score as "opera, but it feels like a classical bed of all the music that embodies our musical palette" (BENNETT 2008). However, with the heavy reliance on pastiche, Danielpour's true musical voice is sometimes difficult to discern. Morrison encouraged him to write stylistically in the modes with which he was most comfortable, and accordingly, the music has a palatable, contemporary feel that does not always support the opera's more epic elements.

Yet Danielpour's musical choices do serve an important purpose. They forge a link between contemporary audiences and antebellum society to draw the audience into the opera's events. The orchestration's utilization of instruments typical of Nineteenth Century music, including a cor anglais, a celesta, and a contrabassoon, to play contemporary American melodies strengthens this link between eras and cultures and thereby further universalizes Margaret Garner's story. Danielpour describes it as "the spirit of the music that might have been heard in the 1850s, but experienced now through the filter of all the music we've heard in our lives – rhythm and blues, jazz, gospel" (JOHNSON 2005). This keeps the music accessible to the non-traditional audiences in attendance.

Furthermore, many of the jazz-influenced melodies have more in common with the work of Gershwin than other contemporary classical composers. Considering his mastery of composing in a range of genres, this is likely an intentional choice on the part Danielpour, who might have realized the benefits of modeling his opera in the style of *Porgy and Bess*,

the most familiar opera with African American subject matter. Audiences more immediately could identify with material that feels so familiar.

(Re)Constructing *Margaret Garner*, Part II: The Narrative

Margaret Garner begins in the town of Richwood Station, Kentucky in April 1856. In the opening sequence, the townspeople describe the slaves as infantile onuses that require domesticization, as the slaves convey to each other the joys they experience rearing and loving their children.

The protagonists are introduced in quick succession. Aggressive and intolerant, Edward Gaines is making his return to Maplewood plantation after an absence of more than two decades. With him is his forward-thinking adult daughter, Caroline. Margaret Garner, stunningly attractive with a fiery temper, is quickly noticed by her new owner. The welfare of her family is always of paramount importance to Margaret, an extremely devoted wife and mother. Sharing Margaret's home are Robert, his mother, Cilla, and the couple's young daughter.

Cilla warns Margaret of the dangers of becoming too attached to her child because as a slave, she is not accorded all of her natural, or even expected, parental rights. As time passes, Gaines requires Margaret to spend an increasing amount of time toiling in his kitchen and less with her husband and daughter. Demoralized and browbeaten, Margaret expends most of her energy trying to stave off Gaines's violently lascivious advances. He eventually rapes her in the summer of 1858.

The second act begins late in the winter of 1861, just prior to the start of the Civil War. By now, Margaret has given birth to her second child. Frustrated with slavery's limitations, Margaret and Robert assert control by deciding to flee Maplewood. In the escape, Robert is forced to kill their sadistic overseer, Casey. Immediately, they flee to the outskirts of Cincinnati, where Margaret and Robert hide with their two children in an underground shed for more than three weeks. The prospect of the freedom that their children will enjoy has them optimistic for the first time in years.

However, an inebriated Gaines and a large crew of slave catchers suddenly overtake the family. The posse forces its way into the shed and lynches Robert in revenge for his murder of Casey. Upon seeing her husband's limp body hanging from a tree, a distraught Margaret immediately realizes that her motherly duties are to shield her children

from all of the horrors and indignities of slavery; she slits the throat of one child and then stabs the other to death. Alone with her thoughts, she gauges the ramifications of her actions and accepts them with the audacity of dignity.

Two months elapse and Margaret is on trial in Kentucky. She is charged with the capital offense of destruction of property for the slayings of her two children. Despite abolitionists' pleas for Margaret to be viewed as a human being – and thus be charged with the murder of her children rather than merely property damage – the panel of judges finds her guilty. They aver that as a slave, she lacks any legal rights to her life or her children's, and sentence her to death by hanging. Upon hearing the verdict, Garner boldly asserts in front of the entire courtroom that she is an individual over whom no one has any power.

Compunction inspired by a conversation with Caroline leads Gaines to intervene on Margaret's behalf. His intercession successful, the judges rule that Margaret's life will be spared and she will once again be remanded to Maplewood if she only allocutes and repents. Feeling that she has been brutalized enough by slavery, Margaret avows that she wishes to live in a fair and just community. Comprehending that none exists in 1860s America, she deliberately trips the stool to hang herself. Through dazed by Margaret Garner's choice, the townspeople are left in a state of deep contemplation over the significance of her act. As the crowd laments that which has proceeded, Gaines is left alone to contemplate the lack of freedom that he feels, leading a life absent of true morality or charity.

Translating History

Obviously, the opera is more of an interpretation of historical events than a direct recapitulation. One immediate instance is the treatment of the timeline in the opera. The events of the historical Garners' escape from slavery and the resulting trial all happened between January and March 1856. They are drawn out over the course of five years in the opera, which does not even begin until April 1856. Moving the opera's events closer to the outbreak of the Civil War underscores the significant role that Garner's case played in the increasingly contentious national slavery debate. Expanding the period over which the opera takes place further illuminates the development of Garner's sense of agency over time, as well as how it was affected by changing societal mores.

Five to ten years older than their historical counterparts, the characters of Margaret and Robert Garner are mature adults who are settled in their lives, rather than a careworn couple in their late adolescence. They are depicted as more measured and self-aware in their decision-making processes. Their discussion of Lincoln's domestic policy makes clear that they are intelligent, socially engaged, and politically adroit people, underscoring that Margaret is keenly aware of the implications her actions have for other slave women. Moreover, from their first appearance, Margaret and the other slaves are described as assured and defiant. Margaret's strong will is on display in her confidence in each decision she makes.

At the time of their escape, the historical Margaret had four children and was pregnant with her fifth. Census records and newspaper accounts indicate that she and her younger three children were light-complexioned and possibly biracial. As stated earlier, historians speculate that Archibald K. Gaines sired all three children. The opera's heroine has one child at its start and has had a second by the beginning of the second act; it is unclear from the libretto if Gaines fathered the second child. There is no indication that either Margaret or her children were of mixed race in the opera. This all but eliminates that possibility that she kills her children as an act of vengeance against her owner, which some historians cite as a possible impetus for the filicide. The opera's Margaret unambiguously kills her children to spare them from slavery's debasement.

The historical Margaret and Robert never lived on the same plantation; Robert was owned by the Marshall family and lived at a neighboring farm. During their escape, the historical Margaret and Robert fled with their four children and his parents; highly unusual from most escapes from slavery, the full family participated in the act. They stayed with Margaret's cousin, Joe Kite, and not in an underground shed. Robert wounded a marshal amid their capture and was never a lynching victim. The cumulative effect of these changes makes Margaret Garner into a righteous figure acting alone, with no family, community, or real support system. She appears a much stronger character due to her solitary actions.

Most notably, for the historical Margaret, there was no noble death or virtuous last minute show of character. Away from the limelight, she died in 1858 of typhoid fever on a plantation in Tennessee Landing, Mississippi.

No other experience in the libretto is as representative of self-determination as childrearing. *Margaret Garner's* community of slaves privileges the opportunity to nurture as a valuable expression of freedom. Receiving the news that they would not be sold and all slave families would remain together, Richwood Station's Black community rejoices as they equate time with their children with a divine blessing. Familial instability looms just over the horizon for them. The second scene of the first act begins with the work song, "O Mother, O Father, Don't Abandon Me!" As the slaves' young children labor in the fields, the adults communicate that the duty of a parent is not to abandon his or her offspring while they also drudge on the plantation. Repeated cries of "crack, cut, pull, chop, split!" reinforce the daily brutality faced by slaves and from which children must be shielded.

Like the others, parenting is Margaret's link to freedom, as she exists in a space where she or any member of her family could be sold, reassigned, sexually violated, or worse at any moment. In her first arioso, "I Made a Little Play Doll," Margaret discloses that watching her young daughter mature is as close to freedom as she can aspire. Further, Margaret is the primary caretaker for Caroline during her years as an adolescent at Maplewood. She experiences Margaret's capacity to love and care for a child firsthand. Contrariwise to the rest of her community, Caroline acknowledges openly Margaret's right to parent.

"She has loved me
Served me, taught me...
Who knows better than she
How to say what love is?
...Father, you shame me.
She is as complete a human as you are." (MORRISON 2005: 20)

Caroline's statements argue that the act of mothering accords undeniable humanity to the women who experience it.

Margaret identifies her love for her family as being the only thing that makes her existence as a slave remotely tolerable. In "A Quality Love," the aria that closes the first act, she sings, "Only an unharnessed heart can survive a locked-down life" (MORRISON 2005: 21). Accordingly, this expression of love is how Margaret fights against the oppression she faces. Depicted as being especially close is the relationship between Margaret and her young daughter. Away from her children, she becomes anxious and ill at ease. Of the bond between his wife and daughter, Robert observes that Margaret needs her children for

survival at least as much as they need her. The ability to serve as a mother is as crucial to Margaret's survival as water or air.

"I need to smell her breath...
I need to see her eyes, her smile.
She is my supper,
The food of my heart." (MORRISON 2005: 12)

Once the element of parenting is eliminated from her life, it is not surprising that death becomes desirable to her.

Even as she and Robert prepare to escape from Maplewood in the first scene of the second act, the freedom of her children remains of paramount importance. In a reprise of the gentle lullaby with which she comforts her infant daughter earlier, she reassures herself that the plan will be successful with reveries of her children's lives after slavery. And in advising the fleeing Margaret to run and "[Save] your children, Mother," Cilla links the path to freedom to maternal responsibility (MORRISON 2005: 25). The emancipation of Margaret's children is ultimately a substrative part of her own.

Upon hearing the verdict and its accompanying death sentence, Margaret Garner vocalizes her authority over her own life. With quiet conviction, she distinguishes herself from her oppressors. Increasing in defiance and volume, she rejects society's claim to reign over her. For Garner, the rectitude of her choices has made her into the master of her destiny, rather than her adjudicators. The reverberations of Garner's actions are felt immediately. In the epilogue that follows, the slave choristers strive for the same brand of agency that Garner displays.

"Have mercy on us.
Help us break through the night...
Let her linger a while a while
And ride the light." (MORRISON 2005: 36)

Conclusion

"...[The] crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot. So if I'm looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it (which doesn't mean that they didn't have it); if I'm trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left – to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that I heard – then the approach that's most productive and

most trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from the image to the text. Not from the text to the image." (MORRISON 2008: 72)

Morrison's words encapsulate Morrison's philosophy for translating Garner's story for the stage. Reconstructing the annals was not nearly as vital crafting an image of an empowered Margaret Garner enfranchising other Black women with her actions. Affording Garner with agency – that is, a story that grants her the control over her life that she never had – helps to reclaim a sense of self-determination that slavery obstructed. While it cannot be stated with certitude how Morrison's revisal ultimately will affect Garner's legacy, her portrait has people engaging with the lengths to which slave women would go to mother their children.

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